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# Think About It: The Role of Think Tanks in Public Debate and Policy-Making

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THINK ABOUT IT: THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN PUBLIC DEBATE AND POLICY-  
MAKING

By: Shana Zelenka

An Independent Study Thesis  
Submitted to the Department of Political Science  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the role of think tank research in Members of Congress's public facing communication. I theorize that legislators' policy preferences already exist and shape the think tank research they choose to discuss instead of think tank research shaping these policy preferences. Many scholars seek to understand the influence of think tanks on policy, but, in doing so, have overlooked the rhetorical use of think tank information by Members of Congress. By addressing these channels of communication through analyzing public facing communicative platforms including Twitter, Facebook, and Floor Speeches, I hope to contribute to think tank research in understanding how these institutions shape, or do not shape, Members of Congress's policy preferences in policy-making.

Using a mixed methodological approach, I find that think tanks are a recurring and prominent feature of Members of Congress's public facing communications and that legislators not only cite think tanks with ideology that aligns with their own, but also cite think tanks with opposite ideological makeup. These findings are consistent with my theoretical argument that Members of Congress tend to cite think tanks to reaffirm existing policy preferences; whether that be through positive or negative rhetoric in their citations of think tanks. These results have important implications for the ways that think tanks are understood in the policy-making process and the influence that research has on Members of Congress's policy preferences.

## **Dedication**

*This thesis is dedicated to my late grandmother, Elizabeth Zelenka.  
Thank you for always being the light in my life.*

## Acknowledgements

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

On April 26, 2018, Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) went on the floor of the United States Senate to give a speech alongside a large cutout board that read “The Heritage Foundation.” In his speech, Senator Merkley refers to the Heritage Foundation as a think tank that engages “in a mission of formulating and promoting rightwing public policies” (Merkley 2018) denies climate change due to the immense amount of corporate money that the organization receives. Additionally, Senator Merkley argues that the Heritage Foundation is “there to do the Koch brothers’ bidding” and their purpose “is to sow doubt, [and] mislead Americans” (Merkley 2018). Senator Merkley’s speech is one of hundreds given by Members of Congress mentioning think tanks alongside policy positions, either rejecting or reaffirming the think tank and its positions.

Think tanks have increasingly risen as prominent institutions that are producing research and reports meant to assist Members of Congress in their policy-making. In the past few decades, the number of think tanks within the United States has soared and surpassed any other country in the number of think tanks existent. Typologies of think tanks have become even more pronounced through this growth, with advocacy think tanks proliferating. Advocacy think tanks are essentially think tanks that have ideological biases that subsequently shape the type of research and funding of the think tank (McGann 2005; Medvetz 2012). As these institutions become more prominent, especially alongside increasing asymmetrical polarization in Congress (M. A. Smith 2011), it is integral to understand the role they play in the complicated and messy political system within the United States.

Think tanks, have been studied as contributors in the policy-making process within political science literature. Scholars have sought to measure the influence that think tanks have on policy but have yet to come to a consensus on the degree to which think tank research actually impacts the construction of policy. However, due to literature emphasizing the degree of influence that think tanks have had, gaps in research have developed. In particular, scholars have generally overlooked the ways that Members of Congress interact with and choose think tank research before policy is created. There has been little information on the ways that think tank information influences legislators' informational processing of research and how these processes may shape theoretical conceptions of the role of think tanks in policy-making at large. Additionally, as social platforms advance and become more widely used by both Members of Congress and think tanks, the channels of communication and networks that connect these entities need to be examined in relation to how public facing communications are impacting the dissemination and collection of advocacy think tank research (Lerner 2018). Thus, while the existing literature on think tanks helps assist in the understanding of these institutions and the connections they have with Members of Congress, there are still puzzles that need to be addressed. In particular, additional research needs to confront question and analyze the degree and extent to which think tank research is used within legislators' information organizing and public facing communications; all of which inevitably shapes policy-making processes at large.

This thesis examines the following question: *How and to what extent is think tank research used in Members of Congress's public facing communications?* In this analysis, I propose an alternative theoretical model seeking to understand the role, or lack thereof, of think tanks in shaping legislators' policy preference. After considering the plethora of research that

currently exists on think tanks and their role in policy-making, I propose and test two sets of two unique hypotheses meant to confront the research question and theoretical model of this thesis at large. This first set of hypotheses seeks to understand the role that think tanks have in Members of Congress's public facing communications which state:

*H<sub>1A</sub>: Think tanks are a prominent and recurring feature of legislators' public statements and presence.*

*H<sub>1B</sub>: Members of Congress also reference think tank information from think tanks with opposing ideology within their public facing communications*

I employ a quantitative methods approach to test H<sub>1A</sub> and H<sub>1B</sub> involving the collection of data on the number of citations of think tanks by Members of Congress in their public facing communications. In order to understand the extent to which legislators engage with think tank research one must understand the degree to which they are cited and the ideological makeup of the parties citing ideological think tanks.

The second set of hypotheses build off the results in the first set by employing a content analysis methodological approach. The second set of hypotheses state that:

*H<sub>2A</sub>: Members of Congress mention think tanks within their public facing communications that ideologically align with their party to support their policy positions through citations of studies or statistics.*

*H<sub>2B</sub>: Members of Congress mention think tanks within their public facing communications that do not ideologically align with their party to either support their policy position more by mentioning that even think tanks on the other end of the aisle agree with certain policy positions or to discredit the credibility of the think tank.*

After collecting and analyzing quantitative data as to the regularity and partisan makeup of the citations of think tanks by Members of Congress, evidence gathered for H<sub>2A</sub> and H<sub>2B</sub> further examines the qualitative mentions of think tanks through sampling a proportion of the total mentions of advocacy think tanks by Members of Congress in their public facing

communications. By doing so, the research question of this thesis can be dynamically analyzed through various methodology approaches and hypotheses.

The thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter 2, I synthesize and examine the scholarly literature that has guided the foundation of this thesis. In reviewing the literature, the gaps in literature and development of the theoretical argument of this thesis is poised. Then, in Chapter 3 the mixed methodological approaches used to test the four hypotheses of this thesis are put forth. Chapter 4 contains the data collected using the quantitative methodological approach detailed in Chapter 3 by testing  $H_{1A}$  and  $H_{1B}$  and providing preliminary conclusions on the findings. Chapter 5 contains the content analysis results with a combination of systematic data collected through this method as well as qualitative data from Members of Congress's public facing communications used to confront  $H_{2A}$  and  $H_{2B}$ . The thesis ends with a concluding chapter that synthesizes the findings of the thesis and evaluates the evidence in relation to the research question, theoretical framework put forth, and hypotheses. The concluding chapter also contains a critical evaluation of limitations within the thesis and suggestions on future research on the topic.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

There are more think tanks in the United States than any other country in the world (McGann 2016). These institutions, as actors in the ongoing political battle for influence in policy-making, have been examined within scholarly literature in the attempt to understand their role in the legislative process and the degree of their influence in the outcome of policy at large. However, there has been a lack of research regarding the processes of informational organizing by Members of Congress and how legislators interact with think tanks as a component of policy-making. As a result, this thesis asks the following research question: *How and to what extent is think tank research used in Members of Congress's public facing communications?* In the attempt to understand the role of advocacy think tanks in Members of Congress's public facing communications, I first deconstruct how scholars conceptualize and categorize think tanks. Afterward, I explore the literature on the historical development and rise of think tanks. Furthermore, I analyze the scholarly literature on how think tanks develop networks and channels of information in an attempt to maximize visibility and credibility through political access. Finally, I consider and propose the theoretical framework of legislative informational organizing in relation to advocacy think tanks. Finally, I examine the gaps that exist within the literature and describe the area of investigation that this thesis researches in the following chapters.

### Conceptualizing Think Tanks and Their Typologies

In the effort to address the research question above, it is necessary to analyze exactly what a think tank is and the rise of advocacy think tanks. Firstly, before conceptualizing think tanks, one must recognize that there is no objective definition of a think tank; in fact, scholars tend to “get bogged down in the vexed question of defining what we mean by ‘think tank’ ... an

exercise which often generates into futile semantics” (James 1998: 409-410). Due to the proliferation of think tanks in the last century, there truly is no typical think tank. They range in size, budgets, specializations, research output, ideological orientation, and institutional independence, all of which make it difficult to deconstruct the variations and similarities among the institutions.

Additionally, scholars tend to examine think tanks through a different lens based on the time in which they conceptualized the institutions. In particular, the understanding of think tanks has continually developed through the last century, therefore, the institutions have been malleable in the ways that people understand them, the various purposes they serve, and their role in policy-making. As a result, in the effort to synthesize scholarly discussion on think tanks, it is necessary to briefly examine the two ways that scholars classify think tanks: broad and narrow classifications.

#### *Broad and Narrow Definitions*

Broad definitions of think tanks attempt to combine the features of think tanks into one concise and overarching definition. For example, James G. McGann (2016), a prominent think tank expert, defines think tanks as “organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues” (7) that can assist the public and policymakers alike in making informed decisions about policy issues. Similar to McGann, Bertelli and Wenger (2009) define think tanks as “independent policy research organizations that often combine research and advocacy” and through their organization, have a “commitment to support the promotion of research and ideas” (225). An older definition by Howlett and Ramesh (1995) describes think tanks as “independent organization[s] engaged in multi-disciplinary research intended to influence public policy” (58), which draws into question the differences between think tanks and academic

institutions. Finally, a more dynamic definition constructed by Rich (2004) recognizes think tanks as “independent, non-interest based, and nonprofit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and influence the policymaking process” (11). All four of these definitions have clear similarities that help to draw out major themes within the overall structures and goals of think tanks, but minor differences between each notably highlight the definitional difficulties of think tanks.

Across all four of the definitions presented by McGann (2016), Bertelli and Wenger (2009), Howlett and Ramesh (1995), and Rich (2004), there is a clear emphasis on influencing policy, implying that think tanks have an integral purpose of conducting research meant to shape policy. By incorporating public policy as a component of defining think tanks, a clear link is developed between think tanks and Congress, therefore, changing the way in which scholars understand the role of think tanks at large. However, due to the broad nature of each of these definitions, one word can potentially change what can or cannot be included as a think tank. For example, between all three definitions, Bertelli and Wenger’s (2009) inclusion of the word *advocacy* suggests a more ideologically driven nature of think tanks compared to other definitions, especially McGann’s (2016). Additionally, when examining all of these definitions, it is important to compare the conceptualization of think tanks to other types of organizations, such as interest groups. Think tanks are one of many types of organizations that, in some way, try and shape public policy, which is why, according to Rich (2004), it is not entirely possible to distinguish all of these organizations because “institutional boundaries are frequently amorphous and overlapping” (11). However, despite the difficulty of drawing distinctions between think tanks and other institutions, Rich’s (2004) definition attempts to make these clarifications by incorporating terminology



within his definition, including non-interest based, and nonprofit organizations, to establish clear organizational structures of think tanks compared to the other definitions. Thus, while each broad definition across scholarly literature is useful in painting a more holistic picture of the functions, structures, and goals of think tanks, there are limitations when expanding the definitions too much.

In order to encompass narrower and more in-depth conceptions of think tanks, Weaver (1989) and McGann (2016; 2005) break down the institutions into three categories: the contract researcher, Universities without students, and advocacy think tanks. However, before examining each typology in-depth, it is important to distinguish that these categories are meant to examine think tanks globally, not just in the United States. As a result, while these definitions help to understand the environment of think tanks, they have the potential to vastly differ in one country compared to another, and these differences must be noted within the context of United States think tanks. In addition, scholars have also recognized that think tanks have begun to expand into multiple categories, forming a sort of hybrid between each narrow conceptualization of the institutions. According to McGann (2016) “newly established think tanks have blurred the lines between these separate categories” (14), thus, drawing into question the historical purposes and functions of think tanks in comparison to how they continue to develop in the present and future. These limitations must be considered when conceptualizing think tanks, and while there is no perfect catch-all definition, by recognizing conceptual variations in the types of think tanks, one can begin to better deconstruct their behaviors, influence, and structures at large.

The first category within the literature on narrow classifications of think tanks includes the contract researcher think tank, which is defined as a think tank that mainly

focuses on the demands of the agencies that contract them (Weaver 1989). Contract research based think tanks have had a strong “reputation for objective research” (McGann 2016: 14) and the agencies that fund them play crucial roles in the development of their policy agenda. The functionality of contract think tanks has shifted in the United States, where contract think tanks have started to have strong ideological ties with the departments or agencies that contract them. The best example of this type of think tank is the Rand Corporation, which is mainly contracted by the United States Department of Defense. Despite having funding streams from a few other agencies, its main funding source has driven its success to be the nation’s leading national security based think tank (Hounshell 2000; J. A. Smith 1991). As a result, it is clear that contract think tanks in the United States tend to be driven through the agencies that fund their particular research goals and agendas, making them more specialized in certain policy areas than others. As a result, contract think tanks are oftentimes affiliated with a certain ideological base determined by their largest funders.

A second category of think tanks presented by scholars is Universities without students. This category exemplifies the dominant formation of think tanks for decades leading up the 1970’s; while they still exist, they are minorities within think tank typologies (Stahl 2016). These think tanks rely heavily on academia to influence their policy research and recommendations, and while some question the differences between these think tanks and academic research, scholars argue that the main distinguishing factor between the two arises with a particular focus on public policy, reiterating previous interpretations of broad definitions of think tanks at large. According to Weaver (1989) the “main product of most of the studentless universities” (568) is books and monographs on particular policy issues,

making this type of think tank more skilled in complex and long-term research on policy issues at large compared to research on specific legislation.

A pertinent example of a think tank that falls within the category of Universities without students is the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). AEI has traditionally fallen into this category, but has recently shifted its policy approach and outcomes, which reiterates the ways that modern day think tanks are blurring the lines between previously established categories. AEI has traditionally focused on more in-depth and long-term policy concerns, such as healthcare and economics, and published books and lengthy policy briefs on the issues. However, they have started to shift from this approach to construct more brief analyses of current legislation and have developed a digital platform to expand their reach (Rich 2004: 68). As a result, while AEI has traditionally been considered a University without students think tank, the shifting demand of think tanks has consequently diminished the pertinence of this category of think tanks, and many institutions that used to fall into this category have since blended into others.

Advocacy think tanks represent the newest think tank model that has developed in recent years. According to Weaver (1989), advocacy think tanks “combine a strong policy, partisan, or ideological bent with aggressive salesmanship and an effort to influence current policy debates” (567). These think tanks promote a certain viewpoint and their policy research is typically sharply partisan (McGann 2005). Scholars argue that compared to the other categories of think tanks, they spend less time developing their own and unique research compared to trying to synthesize existing research and ideas through advocacy networks. These think tanks have arguably had the most impact on public policy due to their access to policymakers, and they put a special emphasis on establishing their credibility in

the eyes of policymakers and developing reliable networks with Congress members (McGann 2016; Rich 2004). They specifically create research products that are “brief enough to read in a limousine ride from National Airport to Capitol Hill,” compared to the more in-depth research products traditionally produced by Universities without students based think tanks (Weaver 1989: 568).

Advocacy think tanks have proliferated since the 1970’s, whereas, according to Rich (2004), “as the number of think tanks has grown in recent decades, well more than half of those that have emerged have represented identifiable ideological proclivities in their missions and research” (10), thus significantly changing the think tank landscape in the United States as a whole. Of this category of think tanks, The Heritage Foundation, founded in 1973, clearly stands as one of the most prominent advocacy think tanks. According to scholars, Heritage changed the role of think tanks by mirroring “the momentum among the lobbyists and interest groups” (Graetz and Shapiro 2005: 89) and focusing on producing sharp conservative partisan research to directly influence policy. Through an exorbitant amount of funding compared to other think tanks, Heritage rapidly grew, moving significantly ahead in partisan think tank research “before the opposition even realized the game had begun” (Graetz and Shapiro 2005: 89). The proliferation of advocacy think tanks was swift and asymmetrical; conservative think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, grew faster in numbers, funding, and networks (M. A. Smith 2011). This growth led to an “overwhelming majority of these ideological think tanks” to be “broadly conservative, producing work that favors limited government, free enterprise, and personal freedom,” which has drastically shaped the influence and reach of various advocacy think tanks as a whole (Rich 2004: 10). This category of think tanks is the central focus of this thesis, and

while the broad definitions help to categorize the overall context of the institutions, the emergence of advocacy think tanks is a primary focus in the study and examination of later determined variables and methods of study.

When analyzing the rise of advocacy think tanks, it is also important to consider other elements within the political system that have impacted or paralleled the proliferation of these institutions. In particular, the asymmetrical rise of conservative think tanks compared to liberal think tanks aligns with the asymmetrical polarization of Republicans and Democrats in Congress since 1970 (Campbell 2016). According to Thomas E. Mann, of the Brookings Institute, and Norman J. Ornstein of AEI, (2016) Republicans have “become ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise...and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition” (103). While Democrats have also become more polarized, they have not shifted as far to the left as the that Republicans have shifted to the right (Mann and Ornstein 2016: 103). This trend of asymmetrical polarization, according to M. A. Smith (2011), is similarly reflected when examining the landscape of advocacy think tanks and their ideological ties. While polarization is not the focus of this thesis, it is important to understand the political conditions in which advocacy think tanks have thrived.

As the political conditions in the U.S. have become more divisive and partisan, it is necessary to analyze the various ideological make-ups of these think tanks prior to deconstructing their historical development in the effort to better understand the existing advocacy think tank landscape. Advocacy think tanks represent four main categories on the political spectrum, including conservative, libertarian, centrist, and progressive think tanks (McGann 2016: 47). As of 2015, according to the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program database (McGann 2016), when breaking down the ideological affiliation of United States

think tanks, 26% are nonpartisan, 20% are conservative, 13% are progressive, and 3% are libertarian. However, according to various scholars, including Abelson (2006), McGann (2016) and Weaver (1989), oftentimes think tanks that fall within the advocacy category and label themselves as nonpartisan are typically not completely nonpartisan but will identify as such in order to garner more credibility and access on the Hill. A good example of this includes the Brookings Institute, which officially classifies itself as nonpartisan, and does research at a more ideologically balanced level, but has produced more progressive policy briefs than conservative based research, causing critics to accuse it of being a liberal think tank (Stahl 2016: 50-51). Clearly, the emergence of advocacy think tanks has changed their ideological make-up and the type of information, ideas, and research they produce.

These three typologies of think tanks paint a narrower picture of the broader definitions offered by other scholars, and thus, can be used to better understand that think tanks are not necessarily one thing, but instead, have the ability to function differently with the similar goal of generating policy research meant to inform the public and policymakers in different ways through different approaches. The various conceptualizations of think tanks provide a deeper understanding of what the institutions are and what they typically look like. From these conceptualizations, it is important to historically examine the proliferation of think tanks, particularly advocacy think tanks, in the process of analyzing the demand of the institutions and the resulting supply of information that has arisen.

#### Historical Context of Think Tanks and Their Growth

In order to examine the proliferation of advocacy think tanks, it is necessary to first analyze their historical growth. In order to do this, one must look beyond just their rapid rise in the 1970's and examine the original functions and role of the institutions prior to the emergence

of advocacy think tanks. Scholars tend to break the historical development of think tanks into three distinct waves. The first wave takes place from 1900-1945, the second wave follows the end of World War II from 1946-1970, and the third wave from 1971-1989. These waves are integral to understanding the history and development of think tanks and serve as useful tools when deconstructing the overall societal influences that contributed to the proliferation of think tanks at large.

### *The First Wave (1900-1945)*

When looking back to the beginning of think tank existence, it must first be understood that “think tanks have long dotted the American political landscape,” (Smith 2011: 86) and a handful of them were founded in the early twentieth century, such as the Brookings Institution and the Russell Sage Foundation. The earliest think tanks were “viewed as centres or institutes that carried out research and provided advice from several ideological perspectives” (Salas-Porras and Murray 2017: 1) and emphasized “maintaining balance and objectivity” (Smith 2011: 86). According to Abelson (2006), the need and demand for think tank arose from philanthropists and policymakers believing institutions were needed outside of universities “whose primary focus was not teaching but research and analysis” (22). This idea led a small group of people to “establish privately funded research institutions” (22) meant to guide policy issues and serve the public interest. Some of the early think tank founders included Robert Brookings, of the Brookings Institute, Andrew Carnegie, Herbert Hoover, John D. Rockefeller Sr., and Margaret Olivia Sage (Abelson 2006: 22).

After their creation, these think tanks represented the think tank category of Universities without students, clearly staying away from sharp ideological research and focusing more on long-term policy concerns (McGann 2016; Stahl 2016). For example, the

Brookings Institute, founded in 1916, was “fundamentally dedicated to the idea of ‘nonpartisan’ technocratic expertise” (Stahl 2016: 8). According to Stahl (2016), the main purpose Brookings was “to stand above specific economic, political, or class interests and to speak for the general welfare of society” through scientific policy research and recommendations (8). As the leader of think tanks then, and as a prominent one now, Brookings clearly demonstrates the think tank approach in the first wave of think tanks and highlights their lack of ideological ties (Abelson 2006: 23).

### *The Second Wave (1946-1970)*

The second wave of think tanks quickly emerged following the end of World War II, “largely in response to growing international and domestic pressures confronting American policymakers” (Abelson 2006: 28). At this point in time, the contractor think tank began to emerge, which juxtapose the University without students model by agencies directly contracting think tanks to produce specific policy research relevant to their fields (Bertelli and Wenger 2009: 229). According to Abelson (2006), there was a demand for scientific and defense-based research, and “by tapping into the expertise of engineers, physicists, biologists, statisticians, and social scientists” (28), policymakers aimed at combatting the new problems that confronted the United States as its position as a hegemonic power in the atomic age. For example, in 1952, think tank Resources for the Future (RFF) received funding from the Ford Foundation to study conservation, development, and natural resources meant to provide policymakers with vital information needed to construct informed policy in these areas (McGann 2016: 26). Additionally, RAND quickly arose as a leader for defense policy research and provided vital information on national security issues that also assisted the United States in its legislative Cold War efforts (Abelson 2006: 29; Bertelli and Wenger



2009: 230). Overall, the “onset of the Cold War and the war on poverty placed new demands on the United States government and provided new opportunities for think tanks to make their presence felt” (Abelson 2006: 29). It was within this wave that the demand for think tanks began to rise, which set the stage for the proliferation of these institutions in the third wave.

### *The Third Wave (1971-1989)*

It was in the third wave that the advocacy think tank quickly arose in the think tank world and has since taken over the majority of the think tank landscape in the United States. This type of think tank grew out of a “profound determination to market their ideas to various target audiences” (Abelson 2006: 31) rather than committing to objective research that previously guided research in the first and second waves. These think tanks became immersed in the political arena and focused on the development of networks and channels with policymakers in order to have the most influence on policy at large. According to Medvetz (2012), the rise of advocacy think tanks aimed at satisfying the “desperate daily need for intellectual meat to feed the hearings, the speeches, [and] the unrelenting policy grinder” (6). For advocacy think tanks, “research became a weapon of political struggle, a means of championing a vision for society and public policy” (M. A. Smith 2011: 87) which reshaped the ways that think tanks functioned, resulting in the institutions becoming “larger, more complex, and more dynamic than ever before” (McGann 2016: 44). In particular, advocacy think tanks shifted the “ideological hue” of the research they conducted (Graetz and Shapiro 2005: 85). This ideological shift “narrowed the space in which think tanks operate...limiting the range of policy choices that they might consider,” (McGann 2016: 45) and changed the overall goals, functions, and role of think tanks at large. The third wave

shaped the current climate of think tanks; most of them favoring an ideology that drives their policy research, suggesting that in the world of think tanks, partisan politics are pertinent (McGann 2016: 45).

### *The Current Think Tank Landscape*

The third wave of think tanks officially began in 1971 and the changes that occurred have continued to shape the overall landscape of think tanks in the United States. The amount of think tanks has more than doubled since 1980 and 90.5 percent of think tanks in the United States were created since 1951 (McGann 2018: 10). Given this timeline, more and more think tanks emerged that followed the ideological structure designed by advocacy think tanks. Currently, according to the 2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report, there are 1,872 think tanks in the United States, which is more than any other country in the world (McGann 2018). Most of these think tanks are advocacy think tanks, and since they rely heavily on the establishment of networks and channels of information, they also rely heavily on funding, access, and perceptions of credibility (Rich 2004). These driving factors considerably impact the ways that think tanks conduct their research and have an important impact on how advocacy think tanks influence policymakers and their collection of information.

### Think Tank Networks and Channels of Information

Advocacy think tanks shifted the traditional roles of think tanks by emphasizing ideological principles within research meant to influence public policy. As a result, these think tanks devote “as much or more effort to spreading the implications of their research than to completing or acquiring it,” (M. A. Smith 2011: 87) demonstrating the new emphasis on establishing networks in order to garner as much influence as possible. Efforts toward the establishment of informational networks with policymakers, the media, and even the public,

have become a central focus in the development and spread of think tank research. However, as a result, according to McGann (2016), “as think tanks have become increasingly focused in their efforts to ensure visibility, questions have surfaced pertaining to the reliability and credibility of published and publicized work” (57). Thus, it is vital to look beyond the scope of think tanks and their historical growth to understand the structures of advocacy think tanks in their continuous effort to influence society and public policy. Literature on the opportunities of access that think tanks have in the United States, the networks and channels of information they create, and their attempts at establishing credibility, all provide a better understanding of how advocacy think tanks profusely work to connect with key players in the relentless policy process of American politics.

#### *Political Access and Opportunity*

Within think tank literature, many scholars attempt to explain factors within the United States that have enabled advocacy think tanks to proliferate at such extraordinary rates compared to think tanks in other countries that greatly lag behind. While there is no clear answer to this question, many scholars, including Abelson (2006), McGann (2016), and Stone and Denham (2004), argue that structures in the United States, in terms of political systems and the dispersion of information, have provided immense opportunities for think tanks to gain political access within the policy-making process. In particular, United States political structures have created a conducive environment for think tanks; they have constant opportunities to attract attention “ranging from testifying before congressional committees and delivering by hand concise summaries of key policy issues to members of Congress to inviting representatives and senators, as well as their staff, to participate in seminars and workshops” (Abelson 2006: 63). Additionally, “the nature of debate in legislative committees

drives a demand for strategic information, and the benefactors of think tanks, seeing a market opportunity, create and maintain the organizations which supply that information” (Bertelli and Wenger 2009: 225). These various opportunities for advocacy think tanks to expand their reach are driving forces within the supply and demand of ideologically driven research within the think tank world.

While political access clearly expands the ability of think tanks to connect with policymakers, it is important to also consider if increased political access leads to increased policy influence. Within think tank literature, scholars do argue that with more political access comes more political influence. For example, according to Lerner (2018), think tanks that have more access and connections with policymakers have a larger reach of influence on public policy. Lerner argues that this extended reach results in advocacy think tanks being incorporated more within the political processes of policy-making, including committee hearings and the development of legislation. According to McGann (2016), “think tanks in the United States have more of an impact on public policy compared with their counterparts in other countries” (55), and increased political access is a driving force behind their increased influence. Thus, political access is a central component of how advocacy think tanks connect their ideologically driven research with policymakers and is the first step of many that strategically assists think tanks in expanding their policy reach.

### *Networks and Channels of Information*

After establishing that think tanks have opportunities to gain political access through United States federal systems, it is necessary to look further as to how these institutions seek to establish networks and channels of information that allow them to expand their outreach and influence. Advocacy think tanks actively market their studies to policymakers and journalists

in the attempt to build their networks and channels of information (McGann 2016). The best example of how much of a priority marketing is to advocacy think tanks is displayed in Andrews's (1989) article "So You Want To Start a Think Tank" in *Policy Review*, which tells think tanks that:

Everything you do, every day, must involve marketing in as many as six dimensions. Market your policy recommendations, market the principles and values behind them, market the tangible publications and events your organization is producing. Market the think tank concept itself. Then market your specific organization. And never stop marketing yourself and the other key individuals who personify the organization. (64)

Marketing, as apparent from Andrew's (1989) account, is a primary component of how think tanks seek to establish networks. Through marketing initiatives, think tanks can meet policymakers, spread their ideas and research, and maintain connections that are vital to capitalizing on the political access that think tanks need in order to be as influential as possible. According to Rich (2004), marketing helps establish high visibility and attempts to solidify funding from competitor think tanks; thus, "the increased number of think tanks leads to an increased emphasis on marketing expertise" (67).

Some common marketing forms for think tanks include sending copies of studies, with shortened summaries, to legislators, staffers, administrators, and journalists. Think tanks expand their networking through holding "conferences and forums to facilitate their personnel's contact with reporters and policymakers" (M. A. Smith 2011: 87). Another growing form of marketing for advocacy think tanks concerns the media; researchers are constantly seeking to appear on radio shows or television and "several think tanks have high

profiles in the media to retain control over their public images” (McGann 2016: 57).

Additionally, as technology and social media continue to expand, think tanks and their researchers use social media as a platform to engage a variety of audiences and networks. The use of the media as a marketing tool has become so pervasive in think tank networking goals that they “diligently track their citations in the mass media” (M. A. Smith 2011: 88) and use these citations in grant and donation seeking efforts by using fundraising techniques to demonstrate the reach of their policy research. For example, the Cato Institute, a prominent libertarian think tank that was founded in 1977, references their citations in their annual reports. In particular, in their 2002 report, they noted having “448 major television appearances, 483 radio appearances, and 474 citations along with 118 op-eds in high-circulation newspapers” (M. A. Smith 2011: 88).

Through networking, and the development of channels of information with policymakers and other notable groups, think tanks attempt to capitalize on their political access (Rich 2004). However, networking also has a key purpose of attempting to establish credibility, or at least the perception of credibility, because in order for policy research to be influential, it must be seen as a credible source of information useful in the policy-making process as a whole. Another facet of the development of think tank networks is the component of what base a particular think tank aims to reach. Advocacy think tanks clearly have ideological ties that shape their target market, and through intense marketing strategies, think tanks strive to develop channels of information with legislators, journalists, and portions of the public that agree with the partisan foundations of the research that think tanks produce.

### *Perceptions of Credibility*

Credibility is a central force within the establishment of networks and through the use of political access, making it one of the most important facets of think tank outreach. The effort toward gaining credibility in the eyes of policymakers is directly tied to think tanks' desire to have as much influence as possible over the policy-making process. Thus, having influence is intrinsically tied to having credibility. However, according to Abelson (2006), "having influence is something all think tanks covet but in reality, most settle for the perception of exercising influence," (171) suggesting that the simple perception of influence is oftentimes enough to help think tanks establish some degree of credibility.

Additionally, not only is the credibility of think tank research important, but so is the credibility of the legislator. According to Bertelli and Wenger (2009) "the transmission of information depends on the credibility of the legislator announcing that information" (228), which arguably shapes the types of information that policymakers will seek out and use in order to refine their own credibility. Thus, the credibility of legislators is impacted by the credibility of their information and think tanks can help "provide legislators with that credibility through research that supports their ideological policy preferences" (Bertelli and Wenger 2009: 228). As policymakers seek to create legislation in alignment with their policy positions and ideological foundations, they often seek out think tank information that will credibly align with their own stances. As a result, think tanks, knowing that legislators value the credibility of the information they decide to transmit, seek to establish credibility as an accredited institution that produces consistent research supporting ideological bases in alignment with what partisan policymakers support (Rich 2004: 102).

When examining the current policy-making climate within the U.S., the increasing polarization between Republican and Democratic parties have increased demand for more ideologically divided information to feed into this polarization (M. A. Smith 2011). As a result, think tanks, which are knowingly aware of the polarization that exists in Congress and in the U.S., deliberately target policymakers that will be receptive to the ideological research conducted by each particular think tank. For example, the Heritage Foundation clearly lays out its ideological hue by stating that its mission “is to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense” (The Heritage Foundation 2018). The Heritage Foundation markets itself as a conservative think tank, and as a result, seeks to develop networks with conservative channels. The think tank, as a result, does not target its research at liberal legislators, and understands that its market falls in alignment with its public ideological position. This marketing strategy is highlighted by Rich (2004), who argues that “think tanks that are ideological or aggressively marketing-oriented obtain different kinds of visibility with congressional staff and journalists,” which impacts “how they are viewed and how their work is received by policymaking audiences” (75). The various visibility complexes that result in how advocacy think tanks position themselves ideologically through marketing strategies has consequences on their perceptions of credibility with policymakers.

#### Congressional Informational Organizing

In the effort to understand the relationship between think tanks and policymakers, it is essential to examine legislative organization as a main component of what drives the supply and demand of these two variables. In particular, according to Krehbiel (2010), legislative



organizing “refers to the allocation of resources and assignment of parliamentary rights to individual legislators or groups of legislators” (2). This concept frames how policymakers decide to organize their resources, particularly their gathering and use of information. The informational organizing of policymakers impacts both “the performance of individual legislators within the legislature,” and “the performance of the legislature within the political system” (Krehbiel 2010: 2). Thus, the concept of legislative organizing has important implications for the development of policy and the institutions of policy-making. Within legislative organizing, scholars have developed informational theories of legislative organizing that examine the ongoing conflict within Congress for policymakers to become specialized on certain areas of policy (Krehbiel 2010: 68). However, the theory claims that the “the legislative committee structure facilitates issue experts and serves to mediate the need for every legislator to be deeply informed on every issue” (Ness 2010). This system results in legislators typically becoming “issue experts on one or two policy issues to the legislative organizational structure,” demonstrating a need for information to assist legislators in developing issue expertise in certain policy areas. This need is explored by May, Koski, and Stramp (2016), who argue that these structures make expertise in policy-making a pertinent part of legislating, and thus, legislators must gather different sources and types of information to fill this demand.

Through the lens of informational congressional organization, think tanks attempt to serve as institutions to fill a need for policy expertise, and the demand for information is only increasing. According to Bertelli and Wenger (2009), as polarization increases in Congress, policymakers have increased demand for ideologically driven information, which leads to an increase in supply of advocacy think tanks. The scholars argue that “the nature of debate in

legislative committees drives a demand for strategic information, and the benefactors of think tanks, seeing a market opportunity, create and maintain the organizations which supply that information” (Bertelli and Wenger 2009: 225). This demand is driven by the position of think tanks as “specialist suppliers of information” that are able to “target legislators who are unlikely to substitute support for the think tank’s policy position with an opposing stance” (Bertelli and Wenger 2009: 228). Scholars argue, based upon informational organizing theory, that congressional members are constantly seeking to find information that allows them to become issue experts, and as polarization has increased, the two parties “have exerted pressure on committee members to obtain information useful for partisan warfare” (Lewallen, Theriault, and Jones 2016: 179).

### Expanding the Literature

The collection of literature on think tanks, particularly advocacy think tanks, and their connection with policy-making, answers and leaves numerous questions moving forward. Within think tank literature, scholars continuously debate the extent of think tank influence on the development of public policy. The ongoing question of think tank influence has been examined in various ways through different methodologies, and while no scholar has objectively answered the question, there are certainly varied perspectives on the impact of think tank research on policy at large. While policy represents a fundamental part of the outcome of policy-making, the think tank literature does not explore what happens before policy creation or even before committee discussion over certain policy, and as a result, it is difficult to gauge the ways that Members of Congress engage in congressional informational organizing in relation to think tanks.

The process of congressional informational organizing is an integral part of how congressional members gather, understand, and implement information in their effort to become policy entrepreneurs and experts in various policy areas. Without examining this process within the context of think tank research, researchers are unsure to how research is used and gathered beyond the marketing strategies of think tanks, leaving a significant gap within the scholarly literature on this phenomenon. Additionally, in the new technological age of policy-making, Members of Congress now utilized social media platforms including Twitter and Facebook, which serves as a public platform for legislators to employ public relations techniques regarding their policy positions and initiatives. In particular, according to Lerner (2018), an integral gap that needs to be studied as think tank research expands is a study that incorporates social media analysis as a methodological approach. If social media analysis is studied, the implications of the use of technology in connection with legislative informational organization can be further examined and the consequences of these results can be considered within future research and understanding of these variables.

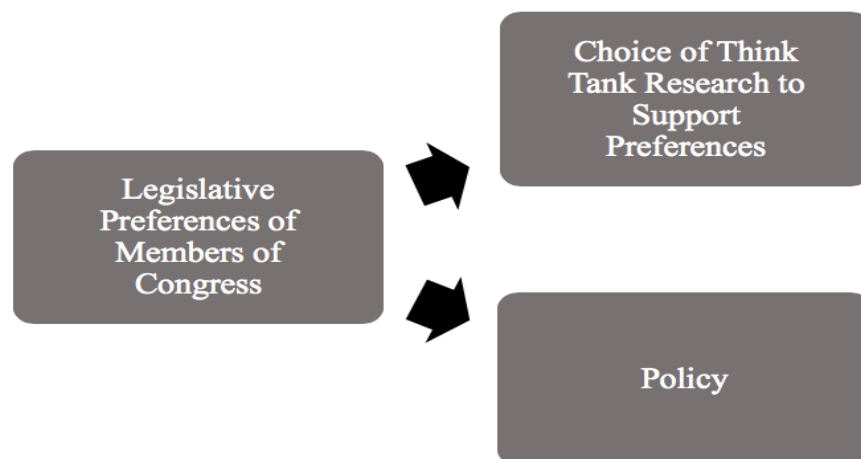
In order to build out of the gaps in research and lack of analysis in the process of informational organizing compared to the results, this thesis seeks to challenge the common model that has been implicit in the work of think tank scholars (Figure 2.1), which tends to assume that think tank research has the power to sway Members of Congress's policy preferences in the attempt to influence policy. This model derives out of a lack of research in the legislative informational gathering process of congressional members in relation to think tanks. The lack of research in this area has resulted in scholars assuming that policy preferences of Members of Congress are malleable as think tank research is distributed.

**Figure 2.1:** Common Model of Think Tank Impact on Legislative Informational Organizing



In response to the common model, this thesis proposes that rather than think tanks producing information and research to shape legislative preferences, that Members of Congress have existing policy preferences embedded in ideological beliefs. Through existing legislative preferences, this thesis proposes an alternative model (Figure 2.2) that poses think tank research as an element of informational gathering that helps support these existing policy preferences, rather than changing them. In juxtaposition to the common model, this model does not view policy preferences as malleable, and instead, argues that think tanks help provide ideologically based information meant to help support these existing positions instead of altering them.

**Figure 2.2:** Alternative Model of Think Tank Impact on Legislative Informational Organizing



This thesis proposes the alternative model as a guide to apply how the research of advocacy think tanks is used in Members of Congress's legislative informational organizing, and how

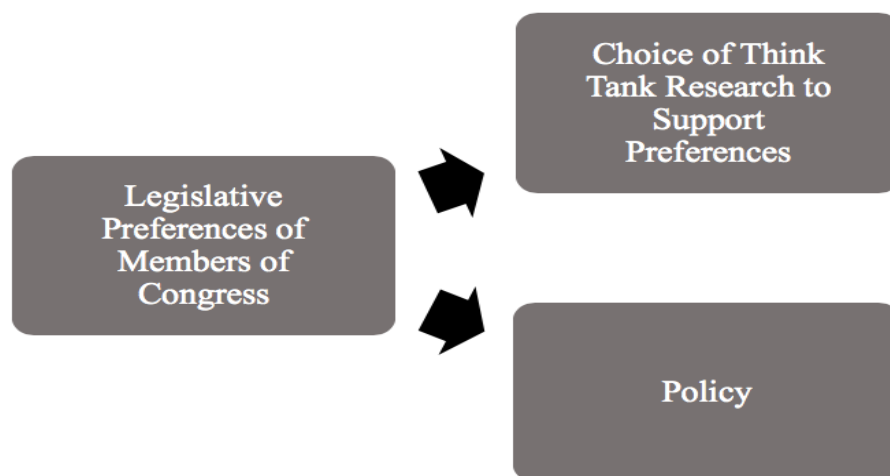
this process works when considering the various policy preferences of legislators. The alternative model considers the gaps in the think tank literature that tend to overlook the process of how Members of Congress consider and use think tank research.

After considering the common and alternative models proposed within the context of the gap in research of think tank information and congressional informational organizing, it is important to examine the work that still needs to be done. By studying the process of informational gathering and organizing, one can better understand the roles of advocacy think tanks in the development of policy, and how congressional members sort through and use various research from these institutions. Furthermore, by analyzing how Members of Congress engage with think tank research through the use of social media, we can better understand the plethora of ways that legislators engage with and use policy information and consider the impacts this usage may have. This approach helps in analyzing how effective the existing marketing and distribution of information efforts of think tanks are when engaging legislative members on particular topics. Additionally, by filling this gap, this thesis hopes to evaluate if and how legislators incorporate this ideologically based research when serving as policy experts and entrepreneurs. From this research, the consequences of these findings can be analyzed when examining the role of advocacy think tank information in policy-making.

### Chapter 3: Methods

The previous chapter explored think tank and informational organizing literature in the attempt to better understand advocacy think tanks and their role in the policy-making process. Despite the wide array of literature that exists on the topic, there are gaps within scholarly discourse regarding the ways in which think tank research is used by Members of Congress throughout the process of policy-making and not just policy outcomes. As a result, this thesis builds off of the proposed alternative model (Figure 3.1) explained at the end of Chapter 2, and asks the following question: *How and to what extent is think tank research used in Members of Congress's public facing communications?* With the alternative model in mind, I hypothesize that legislators use think tank research as a public relations tool when appealing to their constituents and in policy-making.

**Figure 3.1:** Alternative Model of Think Tank Impact on Legislative Informational Organizing



In response to the research question at hand, this thesis posits the following hypotheses in response:

*H<sub>1A</sub>: Think tanks are a prominent and recurring feature of legislators' public statements and presence*

*H<sub>1B</sub>: Members of Congress also reference think tank information from think tanks with opposing ideology within their public facing communications*

*H<sub>2A</sub>: Members of Congress mention think tanks within their public facing communications that ideologically align with their party to support their policy positions through citations of studies or statistics.*

*H<sub>2B</sub>: Members of Congress mention think tanks within their public facing communications that do not ideologically align with their party to either support their policy position more by mentioning that even think tanks on the other end of the aisle agree with certain policy positions or to discredit the credibility of the think tank.*

### Mixed Methods Approach

This thesis evaluates the proposed hypotheses through a mixed methods approach involving both quantitative and qualitative methods. This thesis collects, extracts, and examines data using Quorum Federal by analyzing the mentions of think tanks and think tank research in floor speech's given by Members of Congress and mentions on social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook. The quantitative methods section provides a better understanding of the ways in which legislators engage with think tank information.

Additionally, through content analyses of the citations of think tanks by legislators, I evaluate the role that policy preferences play in citations of corresponding ideological think tanks and opposing ideological think tanks. The quantitative methods and content analysis chapters incorporate varied modes of study in the effort to fill existing gaps in the literature and approach the research question of this thesis in two unique ways. Additionally, both methods complement each other by supporting two different aspects within the legislative informational organizing processes of congressional members by using the same unit of analysis at the individual level.

### Quantitative Method

In direct response to the proposed gaps in literature put forth by Lerner (2018), this thesis empirically examines the trends within the usage of individual verbiage concerning think tank information and research. These mentions include the evaluation of three components of public engagement, including floor speeches, tweets from Members of Congress on Twitter, and posts by Members of Congress on Facebook. Through the examination of three key data areas, content validity is established as all three areas poise a separate niche within the ways that legislators issue public statements and establish their public presence. The data for these three areas of quantitative analysis was gathered using the database Quorum Federal. Quorum Federal provides updated content from legislators on all three areas of public facing communication and provides data analytics for search results. The database also has a plethora of data available and clear and concise information on the individual legislator issuing the public statement, making it easy to maintain the unit of analysis and to produce meaningful results.

By analyzing mentions of think tanks in floor speeches, I consider the pertinence of think tank research in the policy-making process, particularly in the context of when congressional informational theory is used on the House and Senate floors while being publicly recorded. The public record of these speeches represents a key way in which Members of Congress can speak upon and advocate for their policy preferences and suggestions, making floor speeches an important mode of communication to study in response to H<sub>1A</sub> and H<sub>1B</sub>.

In addition to floor speeches, the use of social media as a method of releasing public statements is an area of think tank research that not only has yet to be studied but has key



implications in the ways that social media is being increasingly used as a tool for Members of Congress. In particular, as social media continues to grow as a tool utilized by legislators, it is becoming more important for political scientists to examine the use of social media in connection with policy-making. I chose Twitter and Facebook as the two social media platforms to be analyzed through quantitative methods. This decision was due to the prominence of Members of Congress on both platforms and the varied character count and interactive interface of each platform, making them similar in terms of social media, but different in terms of post capability. In particular, Twitter only allows for 280 characters in a Tweet compared to Facebook allowing for 63,206 characters (Mergel 2012). The use of these two platforms are filtered when searching Quorum Federal in the same way that I analyze floor speeches.

Hypotheses  $H_{1A}$  and  $H_{1B}$  are studied through the quantitative collection and analysis of these three modes of public facing communication. In order to collect the data, the specific name and/or acronyms of prominent think tanks in the United States are searched. In total, twenty think tanks are searched as terms used within Tweets, Facebook posts, and floor speeches by Members of Congress. I determined the number of think tanks searched by using James McGann's (2018) 2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report. Within this report, McGann (2018) ranks 90 of the top think tanks within the United States defining the ranking as such:

This category is dedicated to the leading institutions in the United States of America. These think tanks excel in research, analysis, and public engagement on a wide range of policy issues with the aim of advancing debate, facilitating

cooperation between relevant actors, maintaining public support and funding, and improving the overall quality of life in the United States (McGann 2018).

Since McGann's list includes more than just advocacy think tanks, I narrowed the selection to twenty think tanks in order to maintain research feasibility and to eliminate think tanks outside of Washington, D.C. as well as think tanks that do not focus primarily on influencing policy on the Hill (namely University without students think tanks). The full list of think tanks that I search for in the quantitative methods portion of this thesis can be found in Table 3.2.

Each think tank, within the twenty that are searched, are entered in using the search bar on Quorum Federal. After the think tank name is searched, the document type is checked for each category one by one, including floor speeches, Twitter, and Facebook. For each document type, data is extracted using Quorum Federal's data extraction tools for results on the amount of mentions within each public facing communication mode. The results are limited between the time frame of January 01, 2010-January 27, 2019. These dates were determined based on the prevalence of the social media platforms expanding in 2010 and the cut-off date was based on the dates and time the data could be collected within the limitations of this thesis. The data integral to this analysis includes the party composition percentage of mentions made by Democrats and Republicans as well as the numerical data for numbers of think tank citations by legislators within the time-frame.

After extracting the data, the findings are analyzed in relation to  $H_{1A}$  and  $H_{1B}$ . In regard to  $H_{1A}$ , prominence is measured through a quantitative analysis of how frequently each think tank is mentioned and then added together across the twenty think tanks that are examined. Afterward, the number of mentions of the think tanks per month for the past nine

years are compared to well-known institutions and sources as a comparison to how often think tanks are mentioned. There are ten comparisons of notable sources (Table 3.2) that are used as a data reference point for the past years (from 2010-2018) when determining the average amount of mentions across these sources per month. The list of these sources was determined using the research of Groseclose and Milyo (2005) and Iyengar and Hahn (2009) who explore prominent media sources and their ideological leanings. The research produced by both sets of scholars helps provide a comprehensive list of news sources that would can be somewhat comparable when measuring the prominence of think tank mentions in public facing communications.

Additionally, due to the nature of this thesis's study, identifying comparable sources with a variety of ideological ties mimics the list of think tanks studied well, all varying from conservative, centrist, and liberal leanings. While the comparison has flaws as to the type of information produced between think tanks and the media institutions both report information that can be relayed cohesively in Members of Congress's public facing communications. However, it should be noted that due to the nature of the research at each respective institution, think tanks are positioned more in relation to policy while news sources are positioned more toward the spread and reporting of information (Groseclose and Milyo 2005). As a result, this comparison is not used to entirely support H<sub>1A</sub> but used as a reference point in understanding the percentage of think tank mentions in comparison to the news sources. Once the totals of think tank mentions are added together, they are quantitatively compared to the number of mentions per month of the media sources in Table 3.1, where prominence is critically evaluated and analyzed based off of the results found.

**Table 3.1:** Table of comparable news sources that are used to analyze mentions think tank per month

Comparable News Sources
Fox News
Washington Times
New York Times
PBS
CNN
ABC Good Morning America (GMA)
USA Today
National Public Radio (NPR)
BBC
The Economist

If the number of think tank mentions across the dataset is consistently comparable to the results of the other media sources per month for the past eight years, then it is accepted as prominent. The cap was determined with the prominence of social media platforms as a tool for Members of Congress's public facing communications in mind. In particular, the use of social media as a political tool first gained prominence in 2008 with the Obama campaign which served as a catalyst for politicians to begin using the platforms shortly thereafter (Vonderschmitt 2012). By capping the time period of prominence to 2010, I consider the time it took for Members of Congress to begin using these platforms and the available data from these platforms on Quorum Federal from 2010-2018.

When evaluating  $H_{IB}$ , I compare and contrast the number of think tank mentions by party composition and categorize the twenty think tanks that are searched by three different categories: conservative leaning, centrist leaning, and liberal leaning. These classifications are based on ideological content classifications within James McGann's (2018) 2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report and through content analysis of the websites of each think tank regarding their position philosophy and goals. These classifications are listed in Table 3.2, which also displays the twenty think tanks that are searched. Once each think tank is

classified, it is examined with the context of its ideological leaning in relation to the party composition of the Members mentioning the think tank in their floor speeches, tweets on Twitter, and Facebook posts. Each think tank labeled as either liberal or conservative leaning is added up as to the percentage of mentions by party composition and through a detailed analysis of these findings,  $H_{1B}$  is accepted if there are consistent mentions by opposite party members across all ideological think tanks. Centrist leaning think tanks are not be considered within the examination of  $H_{1B}$  due to the difficulty in measuring what the opposite party would be when the think tank proclaims to be, and is often classified as, centrist. Overall, out of the twenty think tanks, six are labeled as centrist and fourteen are categorized by either conservative or liberal leaning.

**Table 3.2:** Table of think tanks that are quantitatively searched and their corresponding ideological leaning

Think Tank	Ideological Category
Brookings Institution	Liberal Leaning
Heritage Foundation	Conservative Leaning
Cato Institute	Conservative Leaning
Urban Institute	Liberal Leaning
New America Foundation	Centrist Leaning
Hoover Institute	Conservative Leaning
American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI)	Conservative Leaning
Center for American Progress	Liberal Leaning
Americans for Tax Reform (ATR)	Conservative Leaning
Progressive Policy Institute	Liberal Leaning
Center for Strategic and International Studies	Centrist Leaning
RAND Corporation	Centrist Leaning
Center for Economic and Policy Research	Liberal Leaning
Manhattan Institute for Policy Research	Conservative Leaning
Hudson Institute	Conservative Leaning
Atlantic Council	Centrist Leaning
Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC)	Centrist Leaning
Economic Policy Institute (EPI)	Liberal Leaning
Human Rights Watch (HRW)	Liberal Leaning
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	Centrist Leaning

### Content Analysis Method

In order to provide context to the data collected within the quantitative methods chapter, I apply a qualitative content analysis method when examining think tank mentions by legislators in their public facing communications from January 01, 2010-January 27, 2019. The use of content analysis helps to directly evaluate the content within the mentions of think tanks by Members of Congress and allows me to directly evaluate H<sub>2A</sub> and H<sub>2B</sub>. The use of content analysis enables me to objectively, systematically, and quantitatively examine the qualitative features of Members of Congress's communication (Feliciano 1967: 16). Due to the partisan nature of the positioning of Members of Congress and ideological think tanks, I rely on the ideological categorizations of the twenty think tanks found in Table 3.2 and conduct a content analysis only on the seven conservative and seven liberal think tanks. By examining think tanks that have an ideological leaning, I am able to directly contrast the results by each Member of Congress by party and ideological think tank mention; thus, creating a comparable and reliable sample set for a content analysis.

There are a total of 3,314 think tank mentions by legislators within the timeframe, displayed in Tables 5.3 and 5.4 in Chapter 5. Within the context of this thesis, the entire population of public facing communications within this time frame is too large to entirely study. As a result, I systematically sample 15% of the 3,314 think tank mentions. In order to determine the amount of think tank documents I sample for each think tank, I divide the total of think tank mentions per each think tank, which are listed in Tables 5.3 and 5.4 in Chapter 5, by 6.6 and round the result either up or down so that each sample is a whole number. The think tank, total mentions, and sample that I collect and examine in relation to H<sub>2A</sub> and H<sub>2B</sub> are listed in Table 3.3

**Table 3.3:** Table of documents per each think tank collected within the sample of the total population of public facing communications

Think Tank	Total	Sample
Heritage Foundation	1100	167
Cato Institute	201	30
ATR	310	47
AEI	250	38
Manhattan Institute	52	8
Hoover Institute	53	8
Hudson Institute	51	8
Center for American Progress	433	66
Brookings Institution	252	38
Human Rights Watch	166	25
Economic Policy Institute	285	43
Center for Economic and Policy Research	34	5
Urban Institute	112	17
Progressive Policy Institute	15	2
	<b>3314</b>	<b>502</b>

From these calculations, I examine 502 public facing communications by Members of Congress within the time period listed above. In order to collect the 502 documents, I individually search each of the fourteen conservative and liberal think tanks in Quorum Federal. I apply filters on the three types of selected public facing communications (floor speeches, Tweets, and Facebook posts), a filter on legislators as the mentioning source, and apply a filter on the dates mentioned above. Once the think tank is searched with these filters, I download a spreadsheet of the results and randomly choose a number between 1-7. After the document is collected, I repeat the process of randomly choosing a number between 1-7 to decide which document to choose next. The systematic sampling process increases the reliability of the results in reflection of the population at large.

After each think tank mention is collected I complete a coding sheet for the qualitative material. The coding sheet allows me to categorize the mentions into two groups: ideological/polarizing mention or fact-based mention. The determination on which group the document is included in is based on the use of ideological/polarizing and fact-based words found in Table 3.4. Once a document is chosen using the sampling method described above, the public facing communication is searched for the words in Table 3.4.

**Table 3.4:** Table of ideological/polarizing and fact-based words searched within think tank mentions

<b>Ideological/Polarizing Words</b>		<b>Fact-Based Words</b>	
Democrat	Republican	Study	Data
Liberal	Conservative	Statistic	Research
Left-wing	Right-wing	Report	Article
Far-left	Far-right	According to...	Argues
Liberalism	Conservatism		
Left	Right		
Bipartisan	Nonpartisan		
Partisan	Unbiased		
Special Interest Group	Ideology		

The list of ideological/polarizing words was decided upon based on existing literature on ideological and polarizing language by Members of Congress. In particular, Nicholson (2012) studies party identifiers and polarizing cues by politicians through the use of informational processing theory of Members of Congress. His research examines partisan identity; many of the phrases and language mentioned and derived out his study have been used to justify the polarizing and ideological searches within this thesis's content analysis.



Furthermore, Jensen et al. (2012) study political language since 1873 and “identify highly partisan language” (1) in order to conduct an analysis on the pertinence of this language through time. Jensen et al.’s study helped provide further justification when developing the list of words in Table 3.4. Additionally, in order to directly examine H<sub>2A</sub>, fact-based language is searched in the documents to examine if Members of Congress are citing studies and statistics of think tanks. Fact-based language refers to any word that contains verbiage related to a study, statistic, or fact that may be mentioned in conjunction with a think tank. Support from Groseclose and Milyo's study (2005) in which they tracked the amount of citations by think tanks in the news media assisted in my selection of fact-based language to search when think tank research is referenced.

While the words listed in Table 3.4 are not an exhaustive list of terms that would identify ideological/polarizing or fact-based language, they provide a systematic approach to the content analysis of mentions that contain information relevant to H<sub>2A</sub> and H<sub>2B</sub>. Once each document is categorized, I conduct a content analysis by using a coding method to identify mentions into categories of different frames. In particular, Figure 3.5 demonstrates an example of a completed coding sheet that I produce for each entry identified.

**Table 3.5:** Sample completed coding sheet for a legislator’s public facing communication that mentions a think tank and has an identifiable word within Table 4.1.

<i>Think Tank and Ideological Category</i>	The Heritage Foundation- conservative
<i>Legislator</i>	Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI)
<i>Date</i>	October 4, 2018
<i>Ideological/Polarizing or Fact-Based?</i>	Ideological/Polarizing
<i>Floor speech, Tweet, or Facebook Post</i>	Floor Speech
<i>Positive or Negative Rhetoric</i>	Negative
<i>Excerpt Mentioning Think Tank</i>	“These last two considerations are especially important because the Trump administration outsourced the vetting of Supreme Court nominees to the Federalist Society and the Heritage Foundation. These ultra-rightwing groups have spent decades supporting people like Brett Kavanaugh and their ideological, outcome-driven jurisprudence.”

After completing coding sheets for the public facing communications of Members of Congress who mention think tanks and the words listed in Table 5.1 in Chapter 5, I then sort through the results of each completed coded sheet and sort them into the fact-based or ideological/polarizing categories. If an entry contains both ideological/polarizing words and fact-based words, I judge which category fits best for a particular entry. For example, if a public facing communication mentions a study and includes an ideological/polarizing word, it is classified as a Fact-Based document due to the research from the think tank serving as the focal point of the content even if it includes ideological/polarizing words. While this method makes the process more subjective, I include the excerpt mentioning the think tank in each document within the coding sheets that I complete; the coding process is described

further below. If a document is chosen that does not have identifiable ideological/polarizing or fact-based words, it is be skipped, and the systematic sampling is randomly applied again.

Then, the ideological/polarizing and fact-based groups are sorted into two subcategories: positive rhetoric or negative rhetoric. Positive rhetoric is determined by the ideological or polarizing word used in the context of support or affirmation within the frame. Negative rhetoric is determined by the ideological or polarizing word used within the context of delegitimizing or negating a think tank or its policy positions. By creating the positive and negative rhetorical groups, I quantify the number of positive and negative references made by Members of Congress and create visualizations of data on the percentage of Republicans and Democrats using this language in relation to liberal and conservative think tanks. I also include examples of the text when analyzing the data in Chapter 5 to support the data and findings and provide context to the type of rhetoric being used within all the various categories. While the coding sheets include the qualitative mentions, they are used for my purpose in developing the data and findings, which is why some specific content that stands out is directly mentioned within this thesis, but not all of the information collected using the coding sheets is. However, the full document containing the 502 coding sheets is available upon request.

After the steps laid out within this qualitative approach are completed, I evaluate the results and data in relation to H<sub>2A</sub> and H<sub>2B</sub>. Through data visualizations and numerical support of the citations within each classified grouping, I am able to determine the qualitative trends in the ways in which Members of Congress engage with think tank information that comes from both think tanks that align and do not align ideologically with their designated party. The findings found through this method help to support the data collected and

analyzed within the quantitative method for H<sub>1A</sub> and H<sub>1B</sub>. The accumulation of the research through both methodological approaches cohesively responds to the hypotheses at hand and attempts to evaluate the research question and theoretical framework of this thesis at large.

### Conclusion

The mixed methods approach of this thesis, including quantitative methods and content analysis, considers the dynamic approaches that one can take when researching the existing gap in research on how Members of Congress use think tank information in their legislative informational organizing and what the implications of this use are. The use of quantitative methods serves as a more objective mode of analysis when examining Members of Congress's public facing communications regarding floor speeches, the use of tweets on Twitter, and posts on Facebook. Additionally, the content analysis portion of this thesis helps provide context to the rhetoric used within the public facing communications of Members of Congress mentioning ideological think tanks. Through a combination of these methods, this thesis hopes to examine the research question and hypotheses in a multi-dimensional way and make conclusions derived out of both of the varied methods. This study is important as it helps to fill an integral gap into the ways in which Members of Congress use think tank information and the impact that the usage may or may not have on their legislative preference. The conclusions of this research can help strengthen the existing think tank literature and assist in future research that explores this relationship further.

## Chapter 4: Quantitative Findings

The public facing communications of Members of Congress are often representative of their policy positions and concerns. As a result, in order to evaluate the research question of this thesis, it is integral to collect and analyze Members of Congress's quantitative mentions of think tanks in their public facing communications. Through the use of the database Quorum Federal, I collect the floor statements, Tweets, and Facebook posts of Members of Congress that mention any of the twenty selected think tanks. In response to these findings, I analyze the data in considering the hypotheses of  $H_{1A}$  and  $H_{1B}$ , which are stated below:

*$H_{1A}$ : Think tanks are a prominent and recurring feature of legislators' public statements and presence*

*$H_{1B}$ : Members of Congress also reference think tank information from think tanks with opposing ideology within their public facing communications*

Out of the twenty think tanks samples within this thesis, six think tanks are classified as centrist, seven are labeled as liberal leaning, and seven are labeled as conservative learning. The full list of the think tanks can be referenced in Chapter 3 found in Table 3.2. Within the think tank conservative and liberal classifications, it is important to note that each institution has a varying degree of ideological composition within the conservative or liberal spectrum. Furthermore, in alignment with research of asymmetrical polarization, liberal think tanks are not necessarily as ideologically left as some conservative think tanks are right (M. A. Smith 2011). Thus, the liberal and conservative think tank categories should not be considered ideologically equal in terms of partisan positioning within their respective categories. This distinction is necessary when analyzing the data and confronting  $H_{1B}$  due to the ideological differences between Members of Congress when referencing think tanks with

opposing ideology. As a result, the two sets of data from conservative think tank mentions and liberal think tank mentions should not be considered equal under these circumstances.

#### H<sub>1A</sub>: Think Tank Mentions as a Prominent and Recurring Feature

In order to confront H<sub>1A</sub>, I analyze the monthly think tank mentions by Members of Congress in their public facing communications. The amount of think tank mentions from January 01, 2010 to January 27, 2019 can be found next to each respective think tank in Table 4.1.

Additionally, the monthly average of think tank mentions of within the nine-year period can be found in order to provide data on the regularity of mentions over the time frame.

**Table 4.1:** Table of total mentions and monthly average of mentions by think tank

Think Tank	Total Mentions	Monthly Average
Heritage Foundation	1100	10.11
Cato Institute	202	1.85
ATR	312	2.89
AEI	250	2.29
Manhattan Institute	52	0.48
Hoover Institute	53	0.3
Hudson Institute	51	0.47
Center for American Progress	437	4.01
Brookings Institution	312	2.86
Human Rights Watch	167	1.53
Economic Policy Institute	285	2.64
Center for Economic and Policy Research	34	0.32
Urban Institute	112	1.04
Progressive Policy Institute	15	0.16
Center for Strategic and International Studies	74	0.68
New America	32	0.32
RAND	69	0.66
Atlantic Council	67	0.62
Bipartisan Policy Center	177	1.74
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	18	0.17
	<b>3820</b>	

When analyzing the data in Table 4.1, it is clear that each think tank has been mentioned within the time frame more than once. The amount of mentions differs per think tank, ranging from 15 mentions of the Progressive Policy Institute and 1100 mentions of the Heritage Foundation, which is a 98.6% difference between the two. As a result, while each think tank has been a feature of Members of Congress's public facing communications, they have been so at varying levels of prominence and reoccurrence. This finding is important to consider when evaluating H<sub>1A</sub>. In order to compare the data of mentions and average mentions per month by think tank, Table 4.2 lists the ten news sources that were first proposed in Table 3.1 in Chapter 3. The table, as Table 4.1 does, lists each news source, the total amount of mentions, and monthly average of mentions from January 1, 2010 to January 27, 2019.

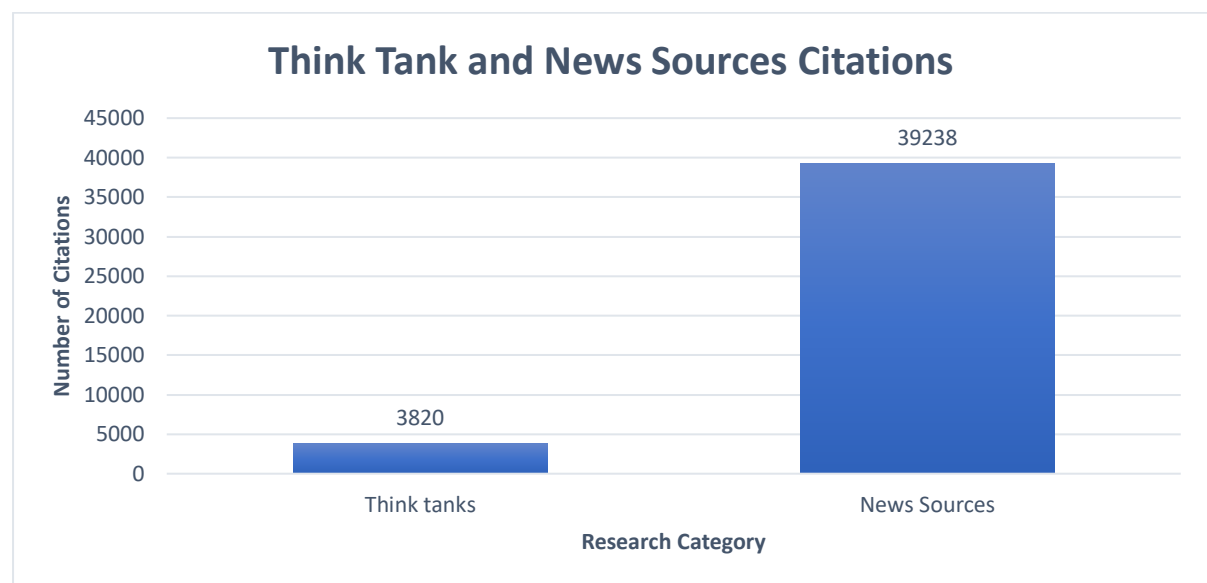
**Table 4.2:** Table of total mentions and monthly average of mentions by news company

News Source	Total Mentions	Monthly Average
Fox News	8438	77.41
Washington Times	1171	10.74
New York Times	4765	43.72
PBS	1314	12.06
CNN	14930	136.97
ABC Good Morning America	212	1.94
USA Today	1574	14.4
National Public Radio (NPR)	2387	21.9
BBC	372	3.41
The Economist	4075	37.39
	<b>39238</b>	

When comparing the data displayed in Tables 4.1 and 4.2, it is apparent that the news sources are cited significantly more than think tanks are cited within Members of Congress's public facing communications. The notoriety and nature of news that is disseminated from

news companies and sources varies in nature from think tank research, particularly in the desire to influence policy, which makes the two groups difficult to holistically compare (McGann 2016). Thus, when examining  $H_{1A}$ , think tanks are not as prominent and recurring within legislator's public facing communications as news sources. Figure 4.1 visualizes the composition of think tank mentions compared to the news source mentions. The bar graph demonstrates the significant difference in think tank citations by Members of Congress compared to news sources across the nine-year time frame.

**Figure 4.1:** Bar Graph of think tank citations compared to news source citations by Members of Congress



Under the conditions poised within Chapter 3,  $H_{1A}$  cannot be wholly accepted in comparison to the news sources. However, the average monthly mentions across the twenty think tanks in Table 4.1 shows that many think tanks are mentioned monthly across the nine-year period. For example, The Heritage Foundation is cited on a monthly average of 10.11 times over the nine-year period and the Center for American Progress is cited an average of 4.01 times per month. These two think tanks, as the two most cited within the sample group, demonstrate that Members of Congress are engaging with think tank information at varying



but notable rates. These findings suggest that while think tank citations within legislators' public communications are not as prominent and recurring compared to news sources, they are mentioned at levels depending on the think tank which is important to consider when analyzing the role of think tanks within floor speeches and social media. Furthermore, the number of citations per month may be impacted by the ideological categorization of the think tank, which is important to consider while evaluating the data for  $H_{B1}$ .

#### $H_{1B}$ : Think Tank Mentions by Members with Opposing Ideology

Beyond examining the regularity of the think tank mentions, I explore the ideological makeup of the think tanks and Members of Congress that mention them in their public facing communications. Examining the ideological leanings of the think tanks is not only relevant to  $H_{1B}$  but can provide further context to the trends observed in Table 4.1 when analyzing  $H_{1A}$ . In Tables 4.3-4.5, the number of think tank mentions by Members of Congress within their public facing communications from January 01, 2010 to January 27, 2019 is split by party and each think tank is labeled to be either conservative, liberal, or centrist. In Table 4.3, the seven conservative think tanks are listed alongside the amount of Republican, Democrat, and Independent mentions within their public facing communications. In Table 4.4, the seven liberal think tanks and their corresponding statistics can be found in the same format as Table 4.3. Finally, in Table 4.5, the six centrist think tanks data is displayed. The centrist think tanks are not used to directly examine  $H_{B1}$  but they provide an interesting contrast to the more partisan composition of the fourteen think tanks marked as either conservative or liberal.

**Table 4.3:** Table of conservative think tank mentions by party

Think Tank	Category	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Total
Heritage Foundation	Conservative	830	265	5	1100
Cato Institute	Conservative	114	81	6	201
ATR	Conservative	281	29	0	310
AEI	Conservative	176	74	0	250
Manhattan Institute	Conservative	43	9	0	52
Hoover Institute	Conservative	45	8	0	53
Hudson Institute	Conservative	45	6	0	51
		1534	472	11	<b>2017</b>

**Table 4.4:** Table of liberal think tank mentions by party

Think Tank	Category	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Total
Center for American Progress	Liberal	24	403	6	433
Brookings Institution	Liberal	75	168	9	252
Human Rights Watch	Liberal	37	126	3	166
Economic Policy Institute	Liberal	20	253	12	285
Center for Economic and Policy Research	Liberal	1	28	5	34
Urban Institute	Liberal	35	75	2	112
Progressive Policy Institute	Liberal	8	5	2	15
		200	1058	39	<b>1297</b>

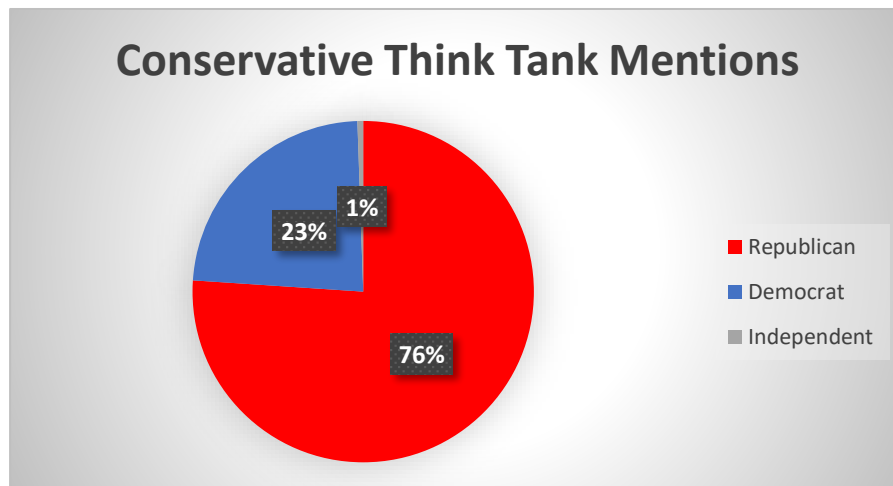
**Table 4.5:** Table of centrist think tank mentions by party

Think Tank	Category	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Total
Center for Strategic and International Studies	Centrist	37	35	2	74
New America	Centrist	8	22	2	32
RAND Corporation	Centrist	26	43	0	69
Atlantic Council	Centrist	44	21	1	66
Bipartisan Policy Center	Centrist	86	88	3	177
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	Centrist	3	13	1	17
		2228	2824	98	<b>435</b>

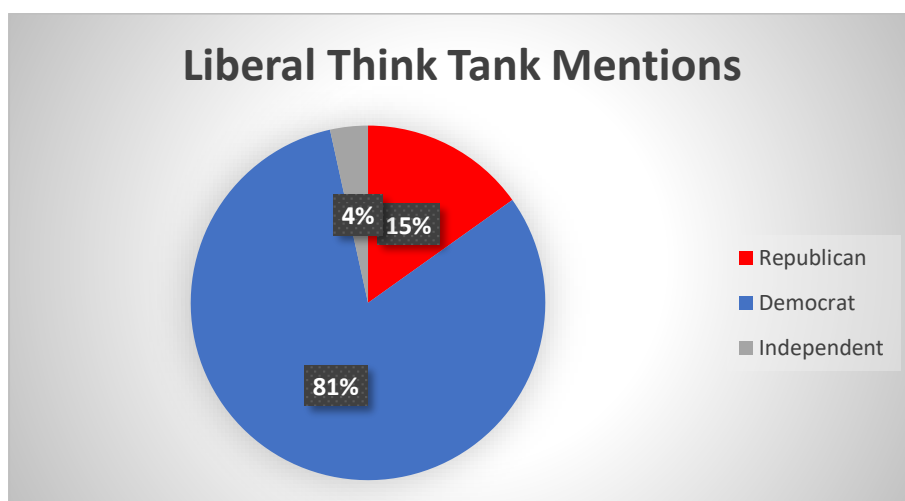
The data represented in Tables 4.3-4.5 demonstrate that each of the twenty think tanks selected for this thesis have been mentioned by both Republican and Democrat

Members of Congress since January 01, 2010. Additionally, conservative think tanks are mentioned the most among the three groups with 2,017 mentions, liberal think tanks have 1,297 mentions, and centrist think tanks have 435 mentions. The opposing parties of each think tank within the conservative and liberal categories have all mentioned ideological think tanks that do not align with their party. However, in order to better analyze the results in relation to  $H_{1B}$ , Figures 4.2 and 4.1 demonstrate the proportion to which each party mentions think tanks with opposing ideology.

**Figure 4.2:** Pie chart of Republican, Democratic, and Independent mentions of conservative think tanks



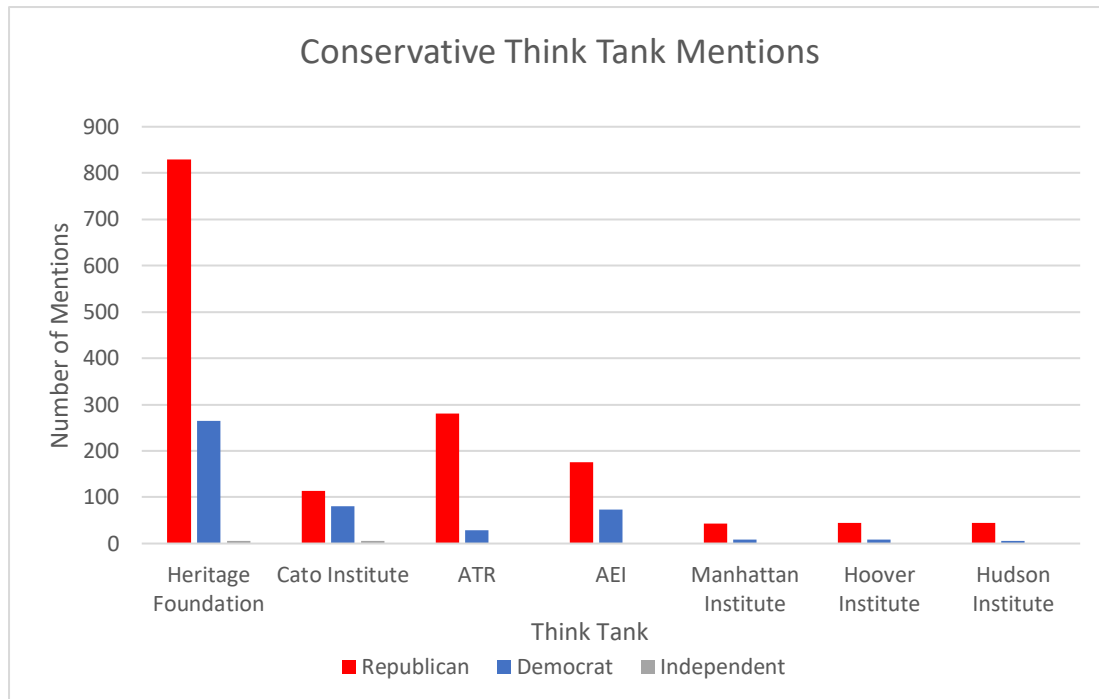
**Figure 4.3:** Pie chart of Republican, Democratic, and Independent mentions of liberal think tanks



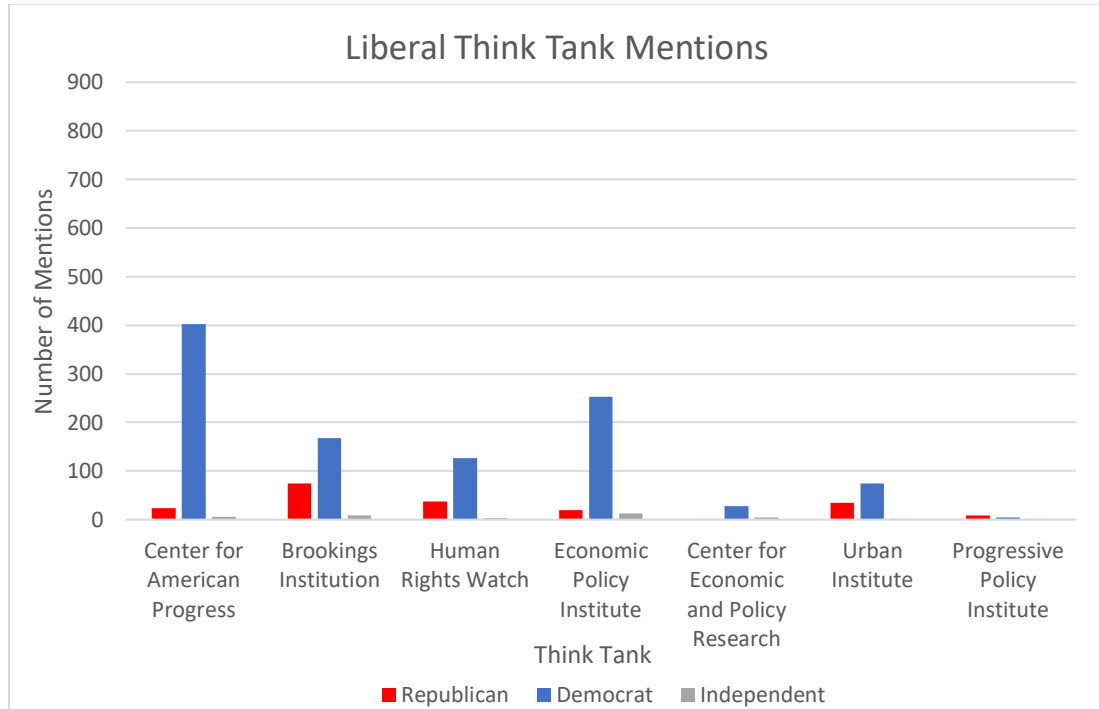
The data displayed in Figures 4.2 and 4.3 is crucial in responding to H<sub>1B</sub>. In particular, Democrats mention conservative think tanks 57.6% more than Republicans mention liberal think tanks, however, it is important to remember that conservative think tanks are mentioned 35.7% more at large than liberal think tanks when examining that figure. Within these figures, mentions of conservative think tanks by Democrats make up almost a quarter of all of the conservative think tank mentions within Members of Congress's public facing communications. In contrast, Republicans cite liberal think tanks 15% of the time, which represents that both Republican and Democrat Members of Congress are citing think tanks with opposing ideology within their public facing communications, despite there being small discrepancies in the rate of mentions between the two parties.

In order to examine the individual think tanks within their conservative and liberal classifications, the data displayed in Figures 4.4 and 4.5 visualize the amount of mentions per think tank by Republicans and Democrats. The data in these figures is made up from the data displayed in Tables 4.3 and 4.4 but provides a visual understanding of each think tank and the amount of mentions received by Members of Congress from both parties

**Figure 4.4:** Bar graph displaying the individual data for conservative think tank mentions by party



**Figure 4.5:** Bar graph displaying the individual data for liberal think tank mentions by party



The data visualized in Figures 4.4 and 4.5 put in perspective which think tanks are being cited more often and by which party. In particular, the Heritage Foundation is clearly cited more than any other think tank with Republican and Democrat mentions combined. In fact, the Heritage Foundation is cited 60.64% more than the highest mentions of a liberal think tank, The Center for American Progress. Additionally, The Heritage Foundation and The Center for American Progress have been deemed the most conservative and liberal think tanks respectively within their groupings by numerous scholars (Katz 2009; McGann 2016; M. A. Smith 2011). Within the sixteen ideologically partisan think tanks studied, the two most partisan think tanks are the two most cited by Members of Congress within their public facing communications. This finding could be reflective of research on asymmetrical polarization because the two most partisan or polarizing think tanks are also the two most cited institution amongst the sample studied.

When examining the data in relation to  $H_{1B}$ , it is clear that Members of Congress reference think tank information from think tanks with opposing ideology within their public facing communications. While Democrats mention conservative think tanks 7% more than Republicans mention liberal think tanks, both parties have a significant amount of mentions across the sample population of think tanks. Thus,  $H_{1B}$  is accepted as legislators clearly reference think tank information from think tanks with opposing ideology. However, the numerical number of mentions within the timeframe does little to shed light on the ways in which Members of Congress engage with think tanks depending on their ideology.

### Conclusion

While both  $H_{1A}$  and  $H_{1B}$  have been considered separately thus far within this chapter, there are important implications and conclusions to make when considering the data and

hypotheses all together. The data in Table 4.1, which displays the total amount of mentions and monthly average of think tank information by legislators over the past nine years, provides a holistic overview of the regularity to which think tanks are cited. However, when the data in Table 4.1 is analyzed in conjunction with the data in Tables 4.3-4.5, I was able to draw trends and conclusions from the think tanks by ideological categorization and party mention when considering H<sub>1A</sub>.

In particular, centrist think tanks, as a group, are mentioned much less than liberal or conservative think tanks. This finding is consistent with think tank and polarization literature which argues that as Congress becomes more polarized and partisan, the demand for advocacy think tanks increases to fill a need for ideologically driven information (Bertelli and Wenger 2009). Additionally, the two most cited think tanks by monthly average, The Heritage Foundation and the Center for American Progress, in Table 4.1, are also arguably the most partisan of the twenty advocacy think tanks. The same conclusion can be found when examining the data by party mentions; The Heritage Foundation is cited more than any other conservative think tank by both Democrats and Republicans and the same is true for the Center for American Progress in the liberal think tank group. As a result, these findings demonstrate that the number of mentions by legislators of think tanks in their public facing communications varies based on think tank and degree of partisanship of each think tank. It appears that the more ideologically right or left think tanks appear more frequently in Members of Congress's communications than more moderate or centrist think tanks such as the RAND Corporation or Center for Strategic and International Studies.

## Chapter 5: Content Analysis

Based on the quantitative findings in Chapter 4, it is clear that legislators are regularly citing think tanks and also mentioning think tanks with opposite ideology. As a result, in order to analyze think tank mentions by Members of Congress in their public facing communications, I decided to apply a content analysis method to provide context to the results in Chapter 4 confront H<sub>2A</sub> and H<sub>2B</sub>. After establishing that think tanks are a prominent and recurring mention of legislator's public facing communications and that Members of Congress also reference think tanks with different ideological leanings than their party position, the actual content of these mentions must be examined. In order to unpack these findings, I examine the rhetoric within the documents to develop a better understanding of the ways in which legislators interact with think tank research in their communications, and thus, evaluate the hypotheses below:

*H<sub>2A</sub>: Members of Congress mention think tanks within their public facing communications that ideologically align with their party to support their policy positions through citations of studies or statistics.*

*H<sub>2B</sub>: Members of Congress mention think tanks within their public facing communications that do not ideologically align with their party to either support their policy position more by mentioning that even think tanks on the other end of the aisle agree with certain policy positions or to discredit the credibility of the think tank.*

Evaluating H<sub>2A</sub> allows me to examine how Members of Congress discuss think tanks with ideology that aligns with their party while H<sub>2B</sub> allows me to examine the mentions by legislators of think tanks with opposing ideology from their party. The fourteen think tanks that are deemed either liberal or conservative in Chapter 3 in Table 3.2 are included within the analysis of this chapter. Through sampling the full population of think tank content from January 01, 2010-January 27, 2019, I collected 502 think tank documents and completed coding sheets for each one identifying important information. The information found in each



coding sheet includes the think tank being mentioned, the Member of Congress mentioning the think tank, the date, mode of public communication, the category it falls within (ideological/polarizing or fact-based), and the type of rhetoric displayed (positive or negative). The use of coding sheets allows me to input the qualitative findings into Excel and calibrate both quantitative and qualitative results that enable me to collect evidence in response to H<sub>2A</sub> and H<sub>2B</sub>.

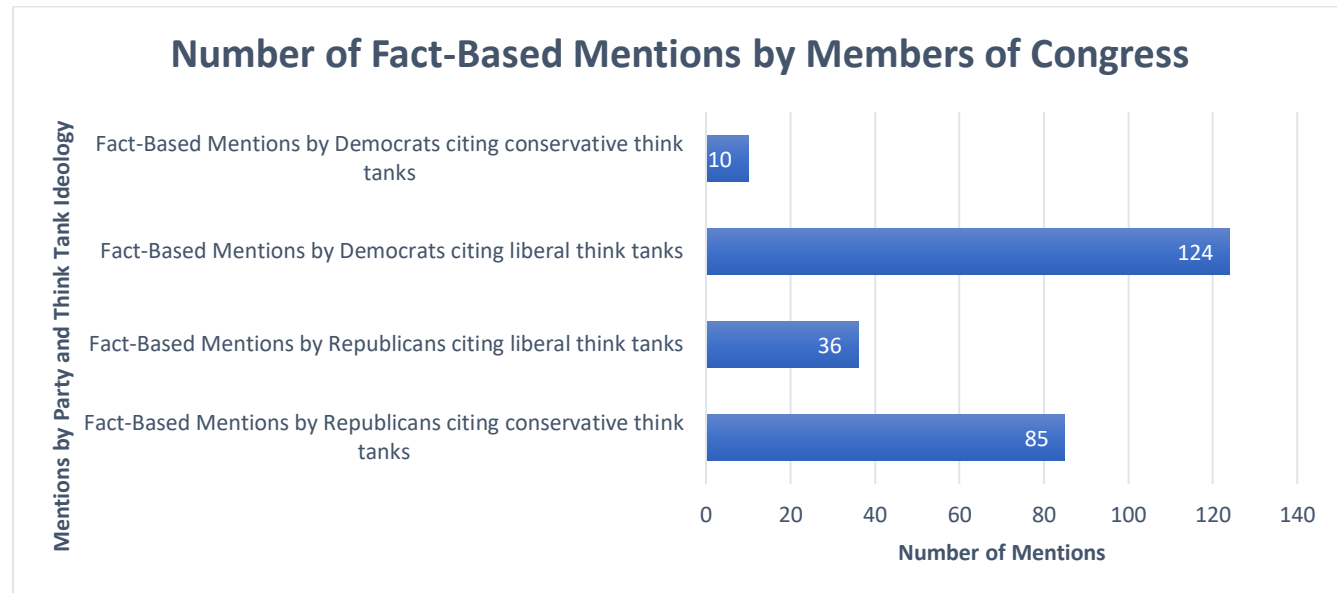
Before examining the results found within this chapter, it is important to distinguish possible shortcomings with the data. In particular, the sample population of conservative think tanks compared to liberal think tanks is asymmetrical; more conservative think tanks are sampled and there is more data within this frame. As a result, when analyzing the results, it must be noted that more documents for conservative think tank mentions have been examined due to the proportional differences between the amount of think tank mentions from each ideological side. Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 4, it is essential to recognize that despite seven think tanks being classified as either conservative or liberal, there is variation within each grouping as to the extent of how conservative or liberal each think tank is. Thus, there is likely to be variation within the ways that legislator's mention think tanks within their public facing communications.

#### H<sub>2A</sub>: Legislator's Mentioning Think Tanks That Ideologically Align with Their Party

In order to evaluate H<sub>2A</sub>, I grouped the 502 mentions into two categories: ideological/polarizing and fact-based. I grouped documents that reference think tank research through citations, statistics, and studies within the fact-based category. Of the 502 mentions, 255 of them were categorized as fact-based and positive. The proportion of fact-based mentions per party think tank ideology is displayed in Figure 5.1. Of all of the fact-based

mentions, none of them displayed negative rhetoric, thus, the data found in Figure 5.1 has all been subcategorized as positive rhetoric.

**Figure 5.1:** Graph displaying the number of fact-based mentions by legislator's per party and think tank ideology



The results displayed in Figure 5.1 demonstrate that fact-based mentions of think tank research by Members of Congress is more prevalent when the think tank aligns with the party of the legislator. In particular, there are 124 fact-based mentions by Democrats with liberal think tanks and 85 fact-based mentions by Republicans with conservative think tanks. In juxtaposition, there are only ten fact-based mentions by Democrats with conservative think tanks and 36 fact-based mentions by Republicans with liberal think tanks. There are significant differences between the amount of fact-based mentions depending on think tank ideology and party, whereas there are 91.9% more fact-based mentions by Democrats of liberal think tanks compared to mentions of conservative think tanks. In regard to Republican fact-based mentions, there are 58% more fact-based mentions by Republicans with conservative think tanks than with liberal think tanks. These statistics show that within the

sampled population of this thesis, there are a significant amount of fact-based mentions by Members of Congress with think tanks that align ideologically with their party.

In order to qualitatively explore these results further, examples of fact-based mentions of each category need to be explored. In order to do this, I analyze content from completed coding sheets that have been categorized as fact-based within each party and think tank ideology combination. When analyzing these coding sheets, I noted two major trends. First, when Members of Congress mention think tanks with corresponding ideology to their party, they typically cite statistics, studies, or research from the think tank to support a policy position put forth by the Member of Congress. Second, when a Member of Congress cites fact-based research from a think tank with opposing ideology, they sometimes emphasize that the think tank typically opposes certain policy positions to stress that a particular piece of research came from a think tank with ideology on the other side of the aisle. Additionally, legislators citing fact-based research from an opposite think tank typically use the citation to support a common policy position within their own party. When Members of Congress employ this method, they attempt to add additional credibility to their policy position providing research from a think tank that surprisingly aligns with their argument. Nonetheless, out of all of the fact-based mentions, all of them include citations or research that supports sentiments reflected by the legislator.

For example, in regard to the first trend, Former Representative Lou Barletta (R-PA-11) cited a study by the Heritage Foundation in a Facebook post on June 28, 2013 concerning the argument for granting amnesty to undocumented immigrants in the United States saying:

If signed into law, this bill will greatly increase the number of newly-legalized workers in this country, who would then compete for scarce resources and jobs with legal immigrants and the 22 million Americans who woke up this morning unable to find a job. Granting amnesty to millions of illegal immigrants would

be a fiscal drain on the federal budget, the economy and legal American residents. It will suppress wages, and cost taxpayers about \$6.3 trillion in social benefits over the life spans of the new residents – even after-tax receipts are realized – according to a study by the Heritage Foundation.

Former Representative Barletta, in this document citing the Heritage Foundation, uses the study by the think tank to support his policy position on illegal immigration. Through the use of statistics and policy claims, Congressman Barletta affirms the fact-based research from the Heritage Foundation and applies it to support his existing ideological positions on the issue which also reflects the Republican party platform on immigration (Hawley 2011; Martin 2017). As a result, this example supports H<sub>2A</sub> and provides context to an example of a fact-based mention of a conservative think tank by a Republican Member of Congress.

Another example of a Republican fact-based mention of a conservative think tank within their public facing communications is a Tweet by Representative John Carter (R-TX-31) on August 21, 2013 mentioning a study by the Cato Institute. In his Tweet, Representative Carter states, “A new study by the CATO Institute shows that welfare programs pay more than minimum wage in 38 states. Why work... <http://t.co/RSq5rNxGzs>.” Representative Carter references a study by Cato Institute concerning states that pay more for welfare than minimum wage and then adds “Why work...” to his Tweet. The content within his tweet implies that the amount that welfare referenced in the Cato study disincentivizes people to work and instead enables them to depend solely on welfare. The study supports Representative Carter’s policy position echoed on his congressional website stating sentiments such as:

I’ve long [Representative Carter] supported funding bills that save taxpayer dollars by prioritizing funding and trimming back or eliminating areas of waste and inefficiency. These efforts rein in executive overreach and bureaucratic red tape that infringes on the rights of Americans and stifles economic growth (Congressman John Carter : Federal Spending 2019)

In his policy positions mentioned on his congressional platform, the Cato Institute study compliments his existing policy beliefs which also frequently align with Republican ideals as well (Gupta 2010). This example supports H<sub>2A</sub> because of the way that Congressman Carter cites a study by Cato Institute to support a policy position/sentiment.

In regard to the second trend observed with the fact-based data collected, Representative Ted Budd (R-NC-13) mentioned research from the Center for American Progress in a floor speech on November 01, 2017 saying:

The Center for American Progress, which has not traditionally been friendly to relaxing financial regulations, has said that these reforms, which were made available to smaller companies in the JOBS Act, were some of the most successful provisions in that law. This bill applies them to all companies, not just those with a certain amount of revenue.

The rhetoric used by Congressman Budd in this floor speech is positive, however, he specifically mentions that the think tank “has not traditionally been friendly to relaxing financial regulations”; financial regulations are typically associated with liberal or Democratic ideals. As a result, his reference to research conducted by the Center for American Progress is used to emphasize that even a think tank that typically opposes policy positions of decreased regulation has “said that these reforms, which were made available to smaller companies in the JOBS Act [a policy that Congressman Budd supported (Brady 2017)], were some of the most successful provisions in that law”. This excerpt from his floor speech reflects the second trend found in the fact-based mentions when Members of Congress mention research from think tanks with opposing ideology. Additionally, Congressman Budd was able to emphasize that the Center for American Progress is not typically fond of decreased financial regulations without using ideological/polarizing language, which differs from results are discussed in the second half of this chapter.

I also observed the same trends within Democratic mentions of think tanks in Members of Congress's public facing communication. In regard to the first trend, Democrats mention liberal think tanks in their public facing communications in a fact-based manner 124 times out of the sampled timeframe and population. Within these citations, Democrats reference studies or statistics to support their policy positions. For example, on September 22, 2017, Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI) cited a Center for American Progress study in a Facebook post regarding how Hawaii residents would be impacted if the Affordable Care Act (H.R. 3590) was repealed. In her post she states:

A New York Times analysis showed Hawaii would be the 11th-hardest hit state in terms of funding cuts per person. By 2027, according to an analysis done by the Center for American Progress, 95,000 Hawaii residents would either lose or have significantly reduced health insurance coverage. And health care consulting firm Avalere estimates that from 2020 to 2036, Hawaii would lose about \$30 billion in federal funding — a 43 percent decrease.

At the time that H.R. 3590 was passed, Senator Hirono was a Representative in the House and voted in favor of the Affordable Care Act (Rangel 2010). As a result, the Senator clearly had existing policy preferences in regard to the policy. Thus, as reflected in her Facebook Post, she cites statistics from the Center for American Progress to demonstrate how Hawaiians would be negatively impacted if the Affordable Care Act would be repealed. This example demonstrates the first trend observed in the fact-based mentions collected within the sample of this thesis and therefore, supports  $H_{2A}$ .

In further support of the first trend observed and of  $H_{2A}$ , another example of a public facing communication by a Democrat mentioning a liberal think tank with fact-based information can be analyzed. In particular, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), is infamously known as a rigorous supporter of climate change initiatives in Congress

through his voting record and self-reported ideology (Acting on Climate Change and Protecting Our Environment | U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island 2019).

Senator Whitehouse cited a Brookings Institute study in a floor speech concerning climate change issues on December 19, 2012 stating that:

A Brookings Institution report found the clean economy employs 2.7 million workers. That is manufacturing and exports, the kind of jobs that support a strong middle class. But in Congress we are sleepwalking through history. We are sleepwalking through history, and we must wake up; awaken to our duties, awaken to our responsibilities, awaken to the plain facts that lay all around us if only we would open our eyes and see them

Senator Whitehouse's citation that a clean economy employs 2.7 million workers not only supports his continued policy preferences to support and implement climate change policy but that there are also economic benefits that ensue when a clean economy is promoted. This example highlights how Members of Congress incorporate the use of think tank statistics within their public facing communications that backs their policy preferences. This finding supports the hypothesis found in H<sub>2A</sub>.

In relation to the second trend, Former Representative Louise Slaughter (D-NY-25) cited a Cato Institute study in a Facebook Post on January 28, 2017 discussing President Trump's executive order (13769) on closing borders to refugees from particular countries in the world, including Iran, Somalia, Sudan, and more (Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States 2017). This executive order was adamantly opposed by Democrats, including Congresswoman Slaughter. Her Facebook Post states:

The president's executive order late last night closing our borders to all refugees and citizens from several countries around the globe is outrageous and an affront to America's values. My heart breaks this afternoon reading news reports of refugees with valid visas already in flight to our country being turned away once they land at our airports, putting them in legal limbo. One person detained

even worked on behalf of our nation in Iraq for a decade. According to a report from the Cato Institute, from 1975 to 2015, not a single American was killed on our soil by a citizen of a country included in the president's executive order. This move is not based on the facts and is not sound foreign policy. It is simply cruel.

The content within this post directly reflects Congresswoman Slaughter's policy position that the executive order "is outrageous and an affront to America's values." The citation of a Cato Institute study reaffirmed her position through the research that "not a single American was killed on our soil by a citizen of a county included in the president's executive order." The reference of this study in her public facing communication reiterates that refugees from the countries listed within President Trump's executive order are nonviolent, thus, suggesting that the justification of the executive order is flawed. This example reflects the second trend observed within the fact-based research results as Representative Slaughter used the research from the Cato Institute to provide factual information that supported her policy position.

When considering the data in Figure 5.1 in conjunction with the six examples and analyses of fact-based think tank mentions by Members of Congress, I accept H<sub>2A</sub> due to the ample amount of both quantitative and qualitative support found within the sample of the 502 documents searched through within this thesis.

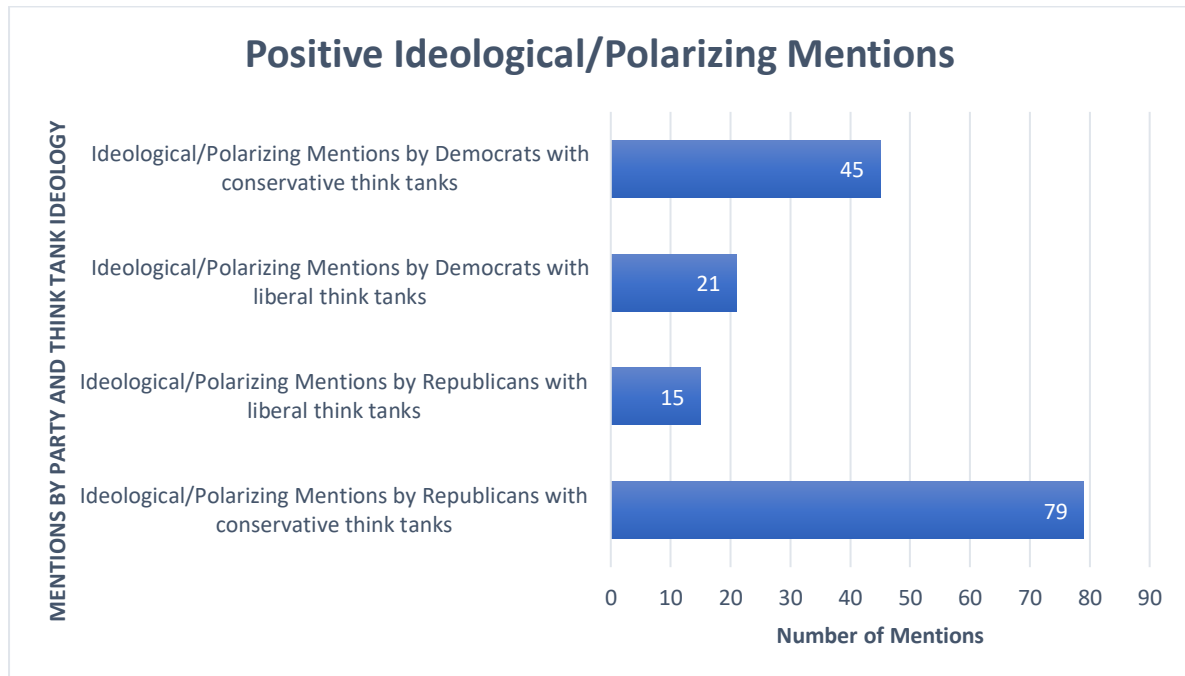
#### H<sub>2B</sub>: Legislator's Mentioning Think Tanks That Do Not Ideologically Align with Their Party

The data used for fact-based mentions by strongly supports accepting H<sub>2A</sub> can also be referenced in addressing H<sub>2B</sub> when analyzing how Members of Congress mention think tanks that do not ideologically align with their party. Out of the 502 public facing communications sampled, 247 were sorted into the ideological/polarizing category. Unlike the fact-based mentions, the ideological/polarizing mentions of think tanks by Members of Congress

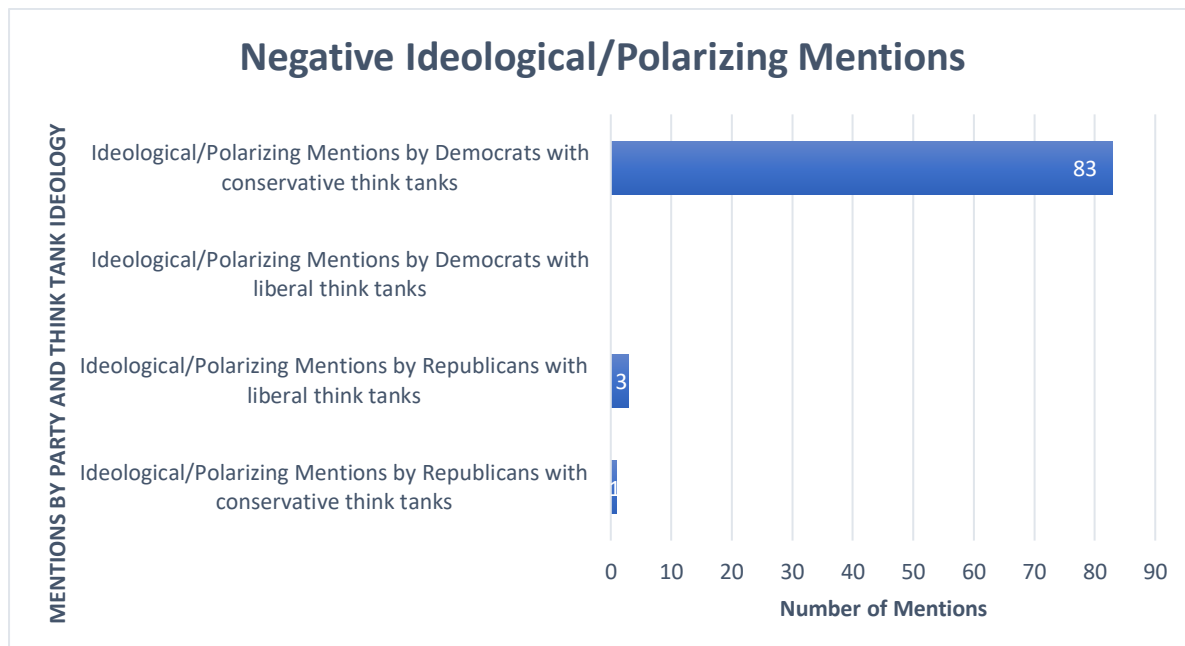


contain documents with both positive and negative rhetoric. As a result, Figures 5.2 and 5.3 visualize the data for positive and negative ideological/polarizing mentions, respectively.

**Figure 5.2:** Graph displaying the number of ideological/polarizing mentions by legislator's per party and think tank ideology



**Figure 5.3:** Graph displaying the number of ideological/polarizing mentions by legislator's per party and think tank ideology



Within the ideological/polarizing documents, there are hardly any negative mentions for any combination of party and think tank ideology other than Democrats mentioning conservative think tanks; there are 83 ideological/polarizing by Democrats mentioning conservative think tanks. In regard to positive ideological/polarizing mentions, the most significant portion of these mentions are from Republicans citing conservative think tanks and Democrats with conservative think tanks. As mentioned earlier, since conservative think tanks make more of the sample than liberal think tanks, it is important to note that the distribution of mentions per think tank ideology is not equal in the evaluation of the data. Despite these differences, the quantitative data displayed in Figures 5.2 and 5.3 must be examined further through analyzing the supplemental qualitative content of select documents that fall within these categories in order to accept or not accept H<sub>2B</sub>.

An example of a Democrat mentioning a conservative think tank in a positive ideological/polarizing can be found in a floor speech given by Representative Sandy Levin (D-MI-9) on July 17, 2013. In her speech, Congressman Levin discussed components of the Affordable Care Act that he supported and mentioned the Heritage Foundation to add even more support. In particular, Congressman Levin stated that:

Republicans know this. Why? Because the individual mandate was a Republican idea going all the way back to the 1980s, when the conservative Heritage Foundation originated the idea. Its supporters have argued: All citizens should be required to obtain a basic level of health insurance. Not having health insurance imposes a risk of delaying medical care. It also may impose costs on others because we, as a society, provide care to the uninsured. The risk of shifting cost to others has led many States to mandate that all drivers have liability insurance. The same logic applies to health insurance.

In his floor speech, Representative Levin mentions that the individual mandate was actually an idea developed by the Heritage foundation. Through specifically mentioning that the Heritage Foundation is conservative, she emphasizes that the individual mandate is not just a

Democratic or liberal policy. Additionally, after the Congressman mentions that this idea originated from the Heritage Foundation, he lists the benefits of the individual mandate to reaffirm his support. This mention of the Heritage Foundation exemplifies the hypothesis stated in H<sub>2B</sub> because of how Representative Levin positively engages with the think tank but does so in a way that undermines conservative policy positions by demonstrating that a conservative think tank was behind a policy that Republicans now adamantly oppose, thus, providing more credibility to her argument and policy position at large (Rangel 2010).

The same theme observed in Congressman Levin's speech can also be found in a floor speech given by Senator Richard Burr (R-NC) mentioning the Center for American Progress in a positive ideological/polarizing way. On July 14, 2015, Senator Burr mentioned the think tank in a speech regarding an amendment he co-sponsored to the Every Child Achieves Act (ECAA) which passed with a vote of 59 to 39 (Bennet-Burr Amendment to Better Fund Education for Impoverished Children Passes Senate 2015). When discussing the amendment Senator Burr stated that:

Eliminating this provision has been suggested by organizations like the Center for American Progress, the Formula Fairness Campaign, the Rural School and Community Trust, and others. These are not conservative groups. These are very left-of-center groups who said equity is important

Senator Burr mentions the Center for American Progress as a supporter that has suggested the same content within the amendment propose. However, he designates that "these are not conservative groups. These are very left-of-center groups," thus, he tries to appeal to both Republicans and Democrats by demonstrating that his policy position has been supported by liberal groups. Senator Burr tries to appeal to Democrats to be supporters of the amendment by using positive ideological/polarizing language. This finding and example aligns with the hypothesis in H<sub>2B</sub>.

A final example of a document collected that was sorted into the positive ideological/polarizing group is a floor speech given by Senator Patrick “Pat” Leahy (D-VT) on October 03, 2017. In his speech, Senator Leahy discusses his unwavering support for admitting refugees into the United States. In particular, he mentions a funding bill that he supports which funds offices and programs that reflect his policy positions on the issue. In his speech he states that:

Last month, the Senate Appropriations Committee--on which I serve as vice chairman--unanimously approved a funding bill that demonstrates our unwavering commitment to refugees. It fully funds offices that are critical to the continuity of refugee programs and even provides a \$50 million increase to the State Department's refugee assistance and resettlement missions. Our bipartisan bill repudiates any claims by President Trump that the United States is unwilling to commit the resources required to fund a refugee program that honors our history as a refuge for the persecuted. Even the conservative Heritage Foundation has called on President Trump to set annual refugee admissions "based on historical refugee levels," which have never dropped below 67,000 per year since the beginning of the Reagan administration.

In Senator Leahy’s justification for the funding bill that provided further funds for refugee assistance and resettlement he mentions that President Trump is along in his unwillingness to support refugees. He supports this claim by mentioning that “even the conservative Heritage Foundation has called on President Trump to set annual refugee admissions ‘based on historical refugee levels.’” Senator Leahy uses this statistic to emphasize that even a conservative think tank has positions on the issue that are at odds with the sentiments expressed by Republican President Trump. Additionally, he mentions the support by the Heritage Foundation to also add credibility to his argument that the bill not only reflects his policy positions, but even conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation have echoed similar preferences. As a result, this example also supports H<sub>2B</sub>.

After noting the positive ideological/polarizing examples, it is important to also analyze negative documents within the same category. Within this category, Democrats clearly negatively engage with conservative think tanks more than any other group. A reoccurring Senator who mentions conservative think tanks in this way is Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI). Senator Whitehouse, as mentioned early, is well-known for his advocacy efforts in addressing climate change. As a result, he has given numerous floor speeches discussing conservative think tanks that oppose climate change by arguing that these think tanks are working in corporate interests and hurting the country and world as a result. For example, in a floor speech given by Senator Whitehouse on May 06, 2015, he mentions several conservative think tanks, including the Hoover Institution, the Heritage Foundation, and the Cato Institute, saying that:

This is the climate denial beast. Polluter money and dark money are its lifeblood. PR front groups are its organs, and lies and obfuscation are its work. Look at the complex interconnection of the beast's major players. The green diamonds are the big funders--the Koch affiliated foundations, the Scaife-affiliated Foundations, the American Petroleum Institute. The blue circles are the who's who of tea party, libertarian, and front groups who have wittingly or not become the flacks for the fossil fuel industry--the Heartland Institute, the Hoover Institution, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the Mercatus Center, to name just a few. Think how much trouble someone must have gone to set all this in play. Think how important the purpose would have to be to them to take all that trouble.

Senator Whitehouse's rhetoric is clearly negative when mentioning these conservative think tanks and the role that he argues they play in climate change denying. This example provides insight into how many Democrats mention conservative think tanks negatively in an ideological/polarizing way. Senator Whitehouse tries to discredit the think tank and provide reasoning behind why these think tanks deny climate change in their research, which

supports H<sub>2</sub>B. Additionally, the core of the issue is centered around Senator Whitehouse's policy preferences, which guides the content of his floor speech and issue framing at large.

In contrast to Senator Whitehouse's negative public facing communication, it is important to also see how Republicans have engaged with liberal think tanks in a negative ideological/polarizing way. For instance, Representative Louie Gohmert (R-TX-2) mentioned the Center for American Progress in a floor speech on July 11, 2017. In his speech he stated that:

Now, there is this liberal group, apparently, Center for American Progress, liberal think tank--I don't know what their tank is full of, but it is obviously more socialistic thinking. But according to this liberal group, the Center of American Progress, if 23 million fewer people have health insurance, then the coverage losses from the Senate bill would result in 27,700 additional deaths in 2026 and 217,000 over the decade. Well, isn't that interesting. There is nothing that they can adequately point to as a factual basis.

This particular example was difficult to categorize because it has both fact-based and ideological/polarizing language within the speech. However, due to the fact that the ideological/polarizing rhetoric is dominant within the citation of statistics, I decided to categorize it as such. When analyzing the excerpt within the speech, it becomes clear that Congressman Gohmert introduces the think tank as a liberal think tank and dismisses their credibility even before citing their study by saying "I don't know what their tank is full of, but it is obviously more socialist thinking." Then, after citing the statistics from the Center for American Progress, he states that "there is nothing that they [the Center for American Progress] can adequately point to as a factual basis," which is Representative Gohmert's attempt to discredit the think tank and the research stated in order to support his policy position against the Affordable Care Act. In alignment with the results in Senator Whitehouse's negative speech, Congressman Gohmert similarly mentions the think tank

ideologically opposite to his party to add credibility to his position and hinder the beliefs of the other side.

Another common finding within the sampled documents that were categorized as negative ideological/polarizing was during the hearings of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Numerous Democrats provided floor speeches discussing the nomination in a negative way. The list of potential nominees that was provided to President Trump was jointly decided on and recommended by the Federalist Society and the Heritage Foundation. While there are many examples of rhetoric for this particular topic, a floor speech given by Senator Richard “Dick” Blumenthal (D-CT) on July 17, 2018 exemplifies the themes well by stating

They have an ideological agenda and no respect for quality in deciding who will serve on the judiciary. Those groups that are trying to remake the court of appeals and the Federal district courts--that is, to remake judges at the lower level--whether it is the Federalist Society or the Heritage Foundation, are also responsible for the President's decision to make himself a puppet of their recommendations, letting them pick judges who meet their anti-choice and anti-healthcare litmus tests.”

Senator Blumenthal, in his floor speech, mentions the Heritage Foundation as a group that has “an ideological agenda and no respect for quality in deciding who will serve on the judiciary.” By using this language, he seeks to discredit the think tank in the process of nominating a Supreme Court Justice. Additionally, he makes these claims in support of not supporting the nominee choices due to the ideological process that he explains. This example demonstrates how Members of Congress engage with ideologically opposite think tanks in the effort to discredit them and provide more legitimacy to the argument made by the legislator themselves. This public facing communication, along with the other examples analyzed, supports H<sub>2B</sub>.

After considering the six qualitative examples analyzed within this section of the chapter as well as the quantitative data found in Figures 5.2 and 5.3, which show that a significant portion of the sampled population has ideological/polarizing mentions,  $H_{2B}$  can be accepted. As a result, I accept both  $H_{2A}$  and  $H_{2B}$  based on the amount of evidence that supports the hypothesis within the sampled population.



## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Previous research regarding the role of think tanks and their connection with Members of Congress has left critical gaps in literature. In particular, existing literature has not fully examined how think tank research is used by Members of Congress in their public facing communications and the impact that these findings may have in policy-making at large. Instead, most think tank literature focuses on the measuring the influence that think tank research has on policy-making by looking at the product of policy rather than the processes leading up to its development. However, studying think tank influence on policy-making assumes that Members of Congress gather think tank research to influence their policy preferences which leads them to use this information in the making of policy. However, this argues that Members of Congress's policy preference shapes the research they use and cite from think tanks and their policy-making choices are developed from their policy preferences but not influenced by the think tank information they use. In considering this alternative theoretical framework and the research gaps that exist, this thesis sought to answer the question: *How and to what extent is think tank research used in Members of Congress's public facing communications?* In order to analyze this question, I employed a mixed methods approach with quantitative analysis and content analysis to deconstruct the ways in which Members of Congress cite think tank research in their public facing communications. Through this approach, I tested four hypotheses:

*H<sub>1A</sub>: Think tanks are a prominent and recurring feature of legislators' public statements and presence.*

When testing H<sub>1A</sub>, I collected and examined data that supports think tanks as a prominent and recurring feature of legislators' public statements and presence. By analyzing the amount of total mentions for the twenty think tanks selected for this thesis, as well as

computing the monthly average of think tank citations per think tank, I was able to analyze the regularity of think tank citations in Members of Congress's public facing communications. In doing this, I found that there were 3,820 citations of think tanks by Members of Congress during the nine-year time frame studied. However, each think tank has their own unique amount of citations. Think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and Center for American Progress have more citations and a higher monthly average of citations whereas other think tanks like New America and the Center for Economic and Policy Research have less. These differences are important to consider due to no think tank being the same as another and each making up a different proportion of the total number of citations for all of the twenty think tanks.

When comparing the data for think tank citations to news sources citations, news sources are clearly cited much more frequently than think tanks. As a result, I found that think tanks are a prominent and recurring feature of Members of Congress's public facing communications but are not as frequently cited as news sources such as Fox News and CNN are. However, it should be noted that there are fundamental differences between the research/information from think tanks and news sources including the availability of the content, the nature of the content, and the audience intended for each category (Groseclose and Milyo 2005). Thus, while the comparability measure applied for H<sub>1A</sub> in this thesis helps provide a comparison of prominence, the differences between think tanks and news sources makes the method imperfect. As a result, there is sufficient evidence supporting the hypothesis that think tanks are a prominent and recurring feature of Members of Congress's public facing communications, however, not to the degree that news sources are prominent.

*H<sub>1B</sub>: Members of Congress also reference think tank information from think tanks with opposing ideology within their public facing communications.*

This hypothesis received significant support based off the evidence of the proportion of mentions by Republicans and Democrats when mentioning conservative and liberal think tanks. In particular, within the parameters of the nine-year period and three modes of public facing communications studied, Democrats mention conservative think tanks 23% of the time while Republican's mention liberal think tanks 15% of the time. These findings support this hypothesis by demonstrating that Members of Congress are clearly engaging with and citing think tanks with opposite ideology within their public facing communications. However, the 8% more citations by Democrats with conservative think tanks compared to Republicans citing liberal think tanks is a difference worth noting. Similar to the data analyzed when evaluating H<sub>1A</sub>, there is variation of how often each individual think tank is cited by each party. This variation is likely due to differences in notability, research, and funding for each think tank which shapes the conditions in which Members of Congress would cite the think tank within their public facing communications (McGann 2016). A major question that arises after finding evidence that supports this hypothesis is what are Members of Congress saying when citing think tanks with opposite ideology. After finding evidence that demonstrates that legislators are citing these think tanks, it is important to deconstruct what is being said when considering the research question and theoretical argument of this thesis. This question is confronted in the testing of H<sub>2A</sub> and H<sub>2B</sub>.

*H<sub>2A</sub>: Members of Congress mention think tanks within their public facing communications that ideologically align with their party to support their policy positions through citations of studies or statistics.*

Both H<sub>2A</sub> and H<sub>2B</sub> concern the actual content of the public facing communications by Members of Congress citing think tanks. Through employing a content analysis and sampling method, I quantitatively categorized the types of citations by legislators and

collected and analyzed the data as to the types of citations and rhetoric used within the mentions. The evidence found through this method supports this hypothesis when analyzing what Members of Congress mention when citing think tanks that align with their party. This finding is significant in understanding how legislators interact with this research in relation to their policy preferences; the evidence suggests that legislators use think tank research in their public facing communications to support policies that they are already known to align with. By using a systematic coding method to categorize types of citations, I was able to directly analyze the fact-based mentions of citations with statistics and studies to support H<sub>2A</sub>. Through the collection and examination of the evidence for H<sub>2A</sub>, I found that the results reflect the alternative theoretical model proposed in this thesis.

*H<sub>2B</sub>: Members of Congress mention think tanks within their public facing communications that do not ideologically align with their party to either support their policy position more by mentioning that even think tanks on the other end of the aisle agree with certain policy positions or to discredit the credibility of the think tank.*

After analyzing legislators' citations of think tanks that ideologically align with their party, the evidence used to examine H<sub>2B</sub> helps support the research gaps that exist after analyzing H<sub>1B</sub>. In particular, while it is quantitatively clear that Members of Congress are citing think tanks with opposite ideology than their party, the research question and theoretical framework cannot be adequately addressed without understanding the content and rhetoric within these citations. In analyzing the mentions by Members of Congress of ideological think tanks that do not align, it becomes clear that legislators cite these think tanks in one or two ways. In particular, they either cite research from these think tanks to further support an existing policy position of theirs. This method allows legislators to confront opposition from the other side to demonstrate that research from a think tank with opposite ideology even supports their positions. Secondly, Members of Congress also

mention these think tanks to discredit the credibility of the think tank on certain policy positions. These two findings strongly support H<sub>2B</sub> and provide context as to what legislators are saying when citing think tanks with opposite ideology.

The research and results of this thesis provide evidence that supports the alternative theoretical model that argues legislators are primarily not using think tank research to shape their policy preferences, rather, their policy preferences are already in place and instead shape the research they use from think tanks. However, these findings are not entirely conclusive and cannot be used to completely accept the alternative theoretical model and hypotheses at large. In particular, the use of interview content with Members of Congress could help directly provide insight into the perspectives of legislators and their citations of think tanks within their public facing communications. Originally, this thesis poised this method but due to the 2018-2019 government shutdown, I encountered significant logistical issues in conducting the interviews. As a result, further research could explore this method to provide additional evidence to the alternative theoretical framework and research question. While interview content would also present limitations, including the authenticity of answers given by Members of Congress and their staff, this method could advance the research and findings found in this thesis, particularly in regard to the alternative theoretical model.

Further research more examination into the role that think tanks have in Members of Congress's public facing communications. While I found quantitative data that supports think tank citations as a prominent and recurring feature of their public facing communications, more research can be done regarding the extent of this hypothesis. As referenced earlier, interview content would help frame how important legislators view think tank research in their public facing communications. Additionally, additional quantitative data could be

collected with other comparison methods to think tank citations other than news sources to study think tank citations as a prominent and recurring feature of legislators' public facing communications. Furthermore, direct analysis of each mode of communication, including Facebook Posts, Tweets, and Floor Speeches, can be separately analyzed to gather evidence in the different citation approaches for each mode. By doing this, research can provide additional insight into the logistical ways that Members of Congress use these methods to cite think tank information. This thesis helps to confront the gap in literature on the use of these communications by Members of Congress when citing think tanks but does not eliminate that gap entirely.

A limitation that exists within the research of this thesis is the subjective nature of the content analysis and coding method. In particular, the coding method employed to quantify the documents into categories contained evaluation that was not entirely objective and contained human error. Thus, this limitation could potentially impact the results found using these methods and could be used and refined in different ways if further research utilizes similar methodologies. Further research could test different coding methods in order to combat this limitation.

Keeping these findings and limitations in mind, there are several important conclusions to be drawn from the research conducted within this thesis. Firstly, the evidence found in examining all four hypotheses supports the alternative model in regard to Members of Congress's policy preferences shaping their choice of think tanks citations in their public facing communications. These findings have important implications in the way that research is understood in shaping, or not shaping, legislators' policy preferences. Additionally, further research using the alternative model can be done with other types of research or advocacy

institutions including interest groups or news sources. This framework can help facilitate future research. As more information and evidence arises on this topic, literature on the role of research in the making of policy can be expanded.

Another important takeaway from this thesis is how platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are changing the ways that legislators create their public facing communications. This new way that Members of Congress are sharing and disseminating information has significant implications on the structing of research in the future. As think tanks continually seek to satisfy the “desperate daily need for intellectual meat to feed the hearings, the speeches, [and] the unrelenting policy grinder” (Medvetz 2012: 6), one can foresee this process being impacted, as advanced and changing platforms arise. As Lerner (2018) recently proposed, social media can be further examined to better understand the ways that these platforms are shaping how Members of Congress interact and use research and the role this may have on the making of policy at large. Studying the impact of think tank research must move beyond the process of policy-making and also explore the interactions that occur before the making of policy, which this thesis attempted to do through studying think tank citations within Members of Congress’s public facing communications. While this thesis took a step in analyzing these methods of communication, further research can be done as the time-frame in which these platforms are being used continues to increase and more data can be examined.

Future research on public opinion can also examine how the use of think tank research by Members of Congress impacts public support or opinion. This thesis provided evidence that think tanks are being mentioned prominently and reoccurring. As a result, further research can examine whether or not Members of Congress citing these think tanks is

impacting public opinion and the role that ideological citations have in this relationship. This area of research can test for the effects of these communications using experiments.



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